US: Chicago fire kills six children

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Early Sunday morning a third-floor apartment on Chicago's North Side caught fire, killing six children ranging in age from 3 to 14 years. Two more children remain in critical condition.

The fire was started by a candle, according to the Chicago Fire Department, and quickly spread throughout the three-bedroom apartment. The family of Amado Ramirez and Augusta Tellez had been without electricity since May and had been using candles for light. Officials have not indicated why the electricity had been turned off, however, it is common for working families to lose their heat and electricity service if they are unable to pay their bills.

The children killed were Vanessa, Eric, Suzette, Idaly, and Kevin Ramirez, ages 14, 12, 10, 6, 3; and Escarlet Ramos, age 3. Escarlet Ramos had been staying over at the home of the Ramirez family the night of the fire.

Ten children plus two adults were living in the crowded apartment. The father and eldest daughter, aged 17, were gone at the time. The mother of five of the children, Augusta Tellez, was treated for injuries along with three other children. Tellez saved her three-month old baby, and neighbors saved one child. Further rescue efforts were blocked by flame and smoke, and by a locked door that could not be broken down. Later, firefighters rescued one more child.

As the fire raged, children were heard screaming in the apartment. The children's bodies were later discovered huddled together in one room. Autopsies indicate that most died of smoke inhalation.

The Ramirez family is a working class family. Both Ramirez and Tellez were employed in a Chicago-area laundry. Initially from Mexico, they entered the US without documentation some 15 years ago and have lived in Chicago since. Some of the children took odd jobs to add to the family income. By all accounts, Amado Ramirez and Augusta Tellez were dedicated parents.

One neighbor, Liz Stutler, who also tutored the children, said that the children studied at night by candlelight.

A 4th-grade teacher at the grade school the children attended, Stephen Brown, described the difficulties the family confronted, "The mother was very hard working. She had to face a life of economic hardship, but she really did put the kids first in every way.... It's too sad, that's all. How is it possible that they don't have electricity? I don't understand."

A neighbor, Jasmin Lamb, said, "The community is in shock. They were a nice, warm family. My friend never got into any trouble."

Early press accounts in both the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Sun-Times* have focused on the fact that no working fire alarms were found in the building by Chicago firefighters. Landlords are required by law to ensure that every apartment has a fire alarm in it.

The building is owned by a wealthy Chicago developer, Jay Johnson, who is proprietor of a number of apartment units in the area. He has contributed to the electoral campaigns of Democratic Party Alderman Joe Moore, and Moore in turn has appointed Johnson to the local planning and zoning commission. Johnson rejected responsibility, and has claimed that functioning smoke alarms were in place when the Ramirez family moved in and that it is the responsibility of the tenant to inform the landlord if the alarms malfunction or are missing.

Moore, who also sits on the Executive Committee of the Democratic National Committee, expressed regret after the incident that the family had not approached him for help with their power bill. This is the typical response of a machine politician, who considers it his role to allocate scarce goods not as a right, but as a "favor." It is also disingenuous. Moore knows full well that tens of thousands of Chicago residents go regularly

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without electricity—even in the winter.

Chicago Fire Commission Raymond Orozco also pinned responsibility on the victims, "If the batteries went out in someone's remote control, how long would that last? But they won't spend a dollar on a 9-volt battery."

Yet the landlord, Johnson, has said that the smoke alarms in his apartment building were hard-wired directly to the main electrical system. If so, it is possible that when the Ramirez family's power was shut off, this simultaneously shut down their smoke alarms. The *Sun Times* has pointed to this possibility, but as of yet neither the landlord, nor the fire department, nor the power company has explained whether or not the decision to cut off power to the Ramirez family also cut off their smoke alarms. Johnson told the *Sun-Times* he was investigating the matter.

The *Chicago Tribune* offered the most callous interpretation of the disaster. It opened its lead article on the disaster by pinning blame squarely on the family itself, stating, "Using candles for light ...was a dangerous decision that proved to be deadly early Sunday." The *Tribune* does not ask why a family with two working adults should be without power in the first place.

ComEd, the power company responsible for suspending the electricity to the Ramirez family, has so far refused to comment. ComEd is a unit of Exelon, one of the nation's largest privately owned utilities, which claims annual revenues of more than $15 billion dollars. In the second fiscal quarter for 2006—the same period in which the Ramirez family went without power—ComEd boasted $644 million in profit.

The utilities giant, together with Ameren, which monopolizes power distribution in downstate Illinois, has promised a rapid increase in residential rates in the coming years. ComEd has suggested it will increase rates by of 8, 7, and 6 percent per year through 2009. This will inflict a serious hardship on millions of already overburdened Illinois families.

For its part, Ameren has proposed that residential rates will increase by as much as 30 percent in one year. Politicians from both the Democratic and Republican parties have authorized this change—ending years of state regulation on energy prices at the behest of ComEd and Ameren, which stand to reap windfall profits in the coming years.

Joe Parnarauskis, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for state Senate in Illinois' 52nd District, released a statement on Monday addressing the disaster:

"The fire that killed six young Chicagoans is an enormous tragedy that demonstrates the barbarity of the capitalist system. Workers everywhere should be outraged, as these deaths were not merely a tragic accident. They were the easily avoidable result of an economic and political system, which puts the profit imperatives of enormous corporations above the most basic needs of working people.

"Even though both parents and a number of children in the Ramirez family worked, they apparently could not afford to pay their electricity bills. They were then compelled to illuminate their house with candles, one of which caught the apartment on fire while the family slept.

"This tragedy highlights the social crisis facing millions of working people in Illinois and throughout the United States, who are facing rising costs and stagnating wages. On a daily basis, people are forced to struggle to meet the costs of basic necessities—food, electricity, housing, and health care. At the same time, a small layer of the population continues to amass huge fortunes.

"Alone among all the campaigns in 2006, the Socialist Equality Party campaign calls for the nationalization and placing under the democratic control of the working people all major utilities. Electricity in homes should be a basic human right, and no longer subject to the merciless pressures of the profit system."

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