

# Grief, shock and anger over New York fire that killed 10

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In the aftermath of the horrific house fire that claimed the lives of nine children and one mother in New York City's borough of the Bronx, there was popular anger, mixed with shock and grief in the streets of New York, over both the fire and the reaction of the city's billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg to this tragedy.

Large numbers of people from the Highbridge neighborhood of the Bronx, where the fire took place, as well as from throughout the city, came over the weekend to the site of the gutted home, which had been occupied by two families, consisting of 22 people, 17 of them children.

They brought food, clothing and other items, including donations of money to help with funeral costs. Many gazed in horror at the burned-out, century-old structure, typical of the housing conditions shared by millions of poor and immigrant families throughout New York City.

Expressions of solidarity and sorrow were mixed with outrage over the conditions in which the working class and poor must live in this, one of the wealthiest cities in the world, as well as the naked indifference of the political establishment to the wanton loss of life created by this social reality. (See "New Yorkers speak out about Bronx House Fire: 'It's like the devil is running the country.'").

The fire began at around 11:00 p.m. on Wednesday, March 8, after a space heater malfunctioned in the house. Apparently, a frayed cord set a nearby mattress on fire. In the ensuing blaze, eight children and one mother died within a few hours. On Friday, a ninth child, seven-year-old Asimi Soumare, died at the hospital from complications caused by smoke inhalation.

The 106-year-old wooden house, like many in the Bronx, had no fire escape and no sprinkler system. The two smoke alarms were without batteries.

Two families of immigrants from the west African nation of Mali were devastated. Moussa Magassa, a former carpenter in the city's school system, and his wife, Niagale, lost five children, the oldest 11, the youngest a year old. Two other children remain hospitalized.

Mamadou Soumare, a taxi driver, lost four children, ranging in age from 7 months to seven years, and his wife Fatoumata, 42. She threw two of her unconscious children from the third story to be caught by neighbors. Then she then jumped,

wearing only a bra and panties.

This human tragedy has served once again to lay bare the vast social gulf that exists between New York's elite of Wall Street and corporate millionaires and billionaires, represented by Bloomberg, and the vast majority of the city's population, which is composed of working class families, many of them, like those killed in the fire, recent immigrants. The lack of any serious response from the establishment politicians and media, together with the clear perception that this devastating loss of life will lead to no changes in conditions for masses of people, has been met with widespread anger.

Mayor Bloomberg appeared briefly on Thursday at a press conference about the fire, before flying off in his private jet to Florida, where he had a speaking engagement and a few meaningless public appearances.

In Miami, he joked, "Some people think I'm here for Spring Break, but actually we're thinking about doing a movie in South Beach"—"Mayors Gone Wild," referring to the vulgar video series, "Girls Gone Wild." When asked if he had considered returning to New York, he replied, "I'm not a firefighter and I'm not a doctor, and I can't find housing for people, but I have people in place to do that."

Confronted with probing questions about why he had not remained in New York after such a massive tragedy, Bloomberg answered the media testily, but ultimately felt compelled to cut his Miami junket short and fly back to the city.

Earlier, his remarks suggested that the victims were to blame for their own deaths. "Using stoves, using space heaters, these are dangerous ways to heat a house," declared the mayor, who no doubt never engages in such practices himself. "The central heating was working. It is still working. The Fire Department checked it this morning. It wasn't a case where there was not heat."

In an attempt to mend his image, City Hall arranged a meeting Friday between the mayor and the fathers of the children who died in the blaze.

He reportedly told them, "There [but] for the grace of God could have been our children." This cliché is hardly adequate to mask the reality of the situation. Such fatal fires are few and far between among the multimillion-dollar townhouses and luxury

apartments on the Upper East Side of Manhattan where Bloomberg lives. Had such a blaze claimed the lives of the wealthy elite in his neighborhood, moreover, it is hardly likely that the mayor would have rushed off to Miami.

The obscene fortunes piled up by the likes of Bloomberg are, in the final analysis, the result of a vast transfer of social wealth from working people in the US, and all over the world, into the bank accounts and stock portfolios of a tiny elite. This is the social foundations of tragedies like the one in the Bronx, which are repeated again and again across the country.

Democratic Gov. Eliot Spitzer met privately at a local mosque in the Bronx with members of the two families on Sunday. Afterwards, he told the media that that although he could not ease their grief, “we will do what we can in a material sense.” But of course, nothing will be done “in a material sense” for the millions of others in the city who live in similar conditions.

The media’s reporting of the tragedy has consisted largely of maudlin sentimentality, feel-good stories about neighborhood heroes rushing to the scene to catch falling toddlers and profiles of the immigrant community from Mali, of which the victims were a part.

Little has been said, however, about the social causes of such tragedies. Rather, on the whole, the role of the media has been to obfuscate and distort the reasons for the fire.

In some cases, press reports—like the comments of the mayor—are dedicated to blaming the victims themselves. Thus, the *Daily News* writes, “Since late Wednesday, Niagale Magassa has been tormented by the destruction that fire officials say was caused by a series of catastrophic mistakes she made.

“A faulty space heater had been left dangerously close to a mattress—but that was only the first tragic error. The 22-year-old tried to douse the flames with water instead of calling 911.”

The Murdoch-owned *New York Post* sums up the prevailing official take on the tragedy when it says it was an event “that really defies comprehension.”

The opposite is true. The causes of the deaths of nine children and a mother in a house fire are all too easy to understand. The growing social inequality in New York City, the overcrowding, lack of education, good jobs, adequate health care, and astronomical rents are to blame.

The Bronx is the poorest urban county in the United States, and the third poorest of all counties. Forty-one percent of the population of the neighborhood in which the fire occurred, Highbridge, live below the federal poverty line. The *New York Times* reports, “The median household income in this hilly corner of the South Bronx is \$20,760 a year. Jobs are scarce, hours long and rents high.”

Immigrant families in the city suffer from some of the worst rates of poverty, and overcrowding in houses and apartments is common. The two families afflicted by the fire came from a French-speaking country and may not have spoken enough

English to call 911. Neighbors questioned whether they understood how to operate the smoke detectors in the house, whose instructions are in English.

One must also ask, why, in a house where the central heating was working, was a family using a space heater? The cost of oil and natural gas for residential houses in the city has risen sharply in recent years.

What were the burdens of mortgage payment? While Moussa Magassa had bought the house in 1996 for \$138,000, it was in poor shape and not easy to fix up. The cost of a fire escape would have ranged between \$6,000 and \$12,000.

City regulations do not require a second exit such as a fire escape or a fire-suppression system such as sprinklers in one- and two-family homes. Nor is it illegal for 22 people to live together. And, of course, no public funding is available to assist low-income homeowners in making such essential safety improvements.

These conditions are not usual for New Yorkers, immigrant and native-born alike. The difficulty of living in such a city has increased in recent years and is only highlighted by the lavish lifestyles and incomes of the richest New Yorkers.

The Highbridge neighborhood is only a few blocks away from Yankee Stadium, one of the biggest boondoggles for the rich in the city’s history.

Construction has begun on a new \$1 billion Yankee Stadium, financed through an estimated \$422 million in direct public subsidies in the form of land giveaways, tax breaks and infrastructure improvements, and some \$920 million more in tax-exempt bonds.

While vast public resources can be made available for Bloomberg’s fellow billionaire, Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, to build a new stadium in which fewer average New Yorkers will be able to afford seats, no funding can be found to improve the housing stock in the same neighborhood or to provide improvements in safety conditions that could save lives throughout the city.

Nearly a century ago, another tragic fire that claimed an unspeakable loss of life—146 victims, almost all of them immigrants—led to a nationwide reform movement to ameliorate conditions in factories and institute serious fire safety codes. The contrast between the reaction to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, and the one elicited by this latest tragedy in the Bronx, could not be clearer. It is a measure of the decline of US capitalism, the lurch to the right by the entire ruling elite and the unprecedented polarization between wealth and poverty that pervades every aspect of present day American society.



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