

Mass outpouring of support for victims of New York City fire

C.W. Rogers
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Thousands of people from around New York City flooded the streets of the Highbridge section of the Bronx Monday morning, packing three blocks surrounding the Islamic Cultural Center to mourn the nine children and one mother tragically killed in last Wednesday's fire morning.

In addition to the outpouring of supporters, predominantly from working class families, including many members of the city's Muslim community, some \$200,000 —most of it in small contributions—was donated to the survivors of the two families devastated by the fire. Immigrants from the impoverished West African nation of Mali, the two families lived in a century-old house with a single wooden stairway, no fire escape and no sprinkler system. There were 22 people including 17 children living in the home.

Mamadou Soumare, a taxi driver, lost his entire immediate family—four children, seven months to seven years of age, and his wife Foutama, 42. Moussa Magassa, a former carpenter, and his wife, Niagale, lost five children, 1 year to 11 years of age, while three others are still in the hospital with conditions that are improving.

Moussa Magassa recently purchased the house and, according to a report in *Newsday*, had filed an application with the city to divide the house into three apartments and install a sprinkler system and a metal stairwell.

"Architect John Ellis, who drew the plans for the work, said Magassa was intent on improving the building, something many owners of the crowded dwellings that house immigrant families never bother to do," *Newsday* reported. There are no regulations in New York requiring sprinklers or fire escapes for smaller one- and two-family houses like this one.

Throughout the city, and particularly in its densely populated immigrant neighborhoods, there are countless similar old one- and two-family structures that have been chopped up into tiny one-room apartments to be rented to poor families struggling to keep up with New York's skyrocketing housing costs. In some cases, even single rooms are divided among immigrant workers, with only a sheet separating their small cubicles.

"You go into these homes, you see the attic occupied. You see the basement occupied. People are packed into these homes, the place is classified as a one-family," Ellis told *Newsday*.

At Monday's funeral service, the two families stood outside the Islamic center, just a few blocks from the site of the fire, as eight hearses loaded with small plain pine box coffins arrived one after

the other.

Hundreds of Muslims filled the mosque for the funeral's prayer services and hundreds of others knelt on cold sidewalks outside on East 166th Street on tarpaulins, rugs and newspapers to join in the prayer that was projected through loudspeakers. Hundreds of women in colorful dresses sat together on the next block.

The Associated Press reported a scene where "news helicopters hovered, satellite trucks raised their dishes and reporters and photographers documented the scene from a riser across the street. The long line of hearses idled."

The five Magassa children were later buried in a cemetery across the Hudson River in New Jersey. Mamadou Soumare is returning with bodies of his family to Mali so that they may be buried in their home country.

After much debate as to whether or not American immigration authorities would allow Soumare back into the US with an expired visa, an undoubtedly political decision was made to grant his reentry. Immigration officials were also said to have discovered a stalled application that Soumare filed for asylum dating back to 1992. One of the common plights shared by immigrant workers is the inability to return to their home countries for the funerals of parents and other family members, out of fear that they would be unable to return to their immediate families in the US.

Also making appearances at the funeral services were New York's elected officials from both big-business parties, including the Democratic Party's leading Presidential contender, Senator Hillary Clinton, New York City's billionaire Republican mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and the state's Democratic governor, Eliot Spitzer. These representatives of New York's ruling elite have presided in one capacity or another over the rapid deterioration of living conditions for working people and the large immigrant population in New York—one of the most socially polarized cities in the US.

Bloomberg, the multibillionaire mayor, has recently become an increasing target of criticism over his manifest indifference toward the problems and needs of the city's overwhelmingly working class and poor population.

He attracted additional ire from New Yorkers when he decided to leave the city for a trip to Florida in the immediate aftermath of the fire. He indignantly defended his decision by claiming he had all the people in place to deal with the tragedy while directing blame toward the victims themselves for not knowing what to do in the event of a fire.

While in Florida, Bloomberg told the press, “[I]’m not a firefighter and I’m not a doctor, and I can’t find housing for people.... I have people in place to do that.”

The politicians who came to the funeral are conscious that must show their faces and feign sharing the grief in order to obscure the reality that their defense of the interests of Wall Street and giant corporations and their refusal to initiate even the most modest programs to alleviate New York’s growing social crisis are what lies behind this tragedy.

While Senator Hillary Clinton showed up to pray with the grieving survivors of the worst fire in NYC in 17 years, there is no indication that she intends to introduce any legislation to make future such tragedies less likely. Indeed, her Web site, while listing many other appearances and statements on issues ranging from “homeland security” to her “support” for the troops in Iraq, makes no mention of her trip to the Bronx or the fire itself.

There is no longer even the pretense, compared with previous eras, of addressing some of the most glaring social problems of the day. Funds for housing, education, health care and nutrition have all been drastically cut over the past 10 years. What has taken place is a wholesale redistribution of wealth not only in New York City, but throughout the country. What remained of the social programs and welfare net established as a result of previous generations’ struggles has been dismantled so that public resources could be funneled to a class of wealthy bankers, hedge fund traders, corporate raiders and CEOs in the form of massive tax breaks.

Appearing before a panel at a Treasury Department conference at Georgetown University on Tuesday, Bloomberg made a more sober comment reflecting the growing fears of a section of America’s ruling elite over the dangerous implications of growing inequality in the US. “[T]his society cannot go forward, the way we have been going forward, where the gap between rich and poor keeps growing,” he warned. “It’s not politically viable; it’s not morally right; it’s just not going to happen.”

Bloomberg is certainly in a position to know—he is, after all, the mayor, and one of the richest individuals, in what qualifies as one of the inequality capitals of the world.

New York has given rise to the country’s largest population of billionaires and greatest concentrations of wealth alongside the deflation of wages and sky-rocketing rents for millions of workers. Manhattan has become increasingly an enclave for the rich, while working people, particularly immigrants have been pushed out, unable to afford rents that average around \$2,400 per month for a single-bedroom apartment.

Rents have exploded throughout the city, including in outer boroughs such as the Bronx, giving rise to conditions where multiple families occupy single dwellings in hazardous conditions that amount to an accident waiting to happen.

Bloomberg’s comments on social inequality to the Treasury Department reflect the widespread acknowledgement and acceptance of this phenomenon within America’s ruling elite in both the Democratic and Republican parties and a warning of its potentially destabilizing or even revolutionary implications.

Behind the massive expression of popular support and solidarity for the fire victims from throughout the city is the recognition that

the fire, though explained officially as an accident caused by a faulty space heater, was really a manifestation of the deterioration of living standards of the working class as a whole, immigrant and non-immigrant alike. For the majority of the supporters and mourners, a tragedy like the deadly Highbridge fire could easily happen to themselves or their loved ones.

In addition to the huge outpouring in the Bronx on Monday, hundreds have traveled from throughout the city and the country to donate money, clothes and other essential goods (see “Grief, shock and anger over New York fire that killed 10”).

One supporter told the press, “I was home watching the news and felt I just had to be here. I don’t know them, but I feel like I know them. I was born and raised in the Bronx and I’m just so sad for the families.”

Another, Iman Konate described the scene, “[I]t was really something. I don’t know how to describe it. People were crying, making prayers, giving donations.” He went on to explain that the two fathers tried to console the mourners who were present, “[T]hey came to us and said, ‘Don’t Cry.’”

A Malian immigrant, Djibril Camara, attending the services said, “[I]t is terrible, people come to this country to provide a better life for their children.”

Some of the most right-wing sections of the media have latched onto the tragedy to shamelessly blame the so-called liberal establishment’s immigration policies as well as the victims themselves. A particularly repugnant example came from the never disappointing Bill O’Reilly of Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News who stated: “[T]hese people died—the [9] children died—because they were in a chaotic home. Seventeen children were in two small apartments...that’s against the law.”

O’Reilly went on in an attack on a viewer who criticized his anti-immigrant rant against the victims of the fire: “Your so-called compassion helped kill those kids...these kids are dead because of the pro-open border people. They’re dead because of them. So put that in your secular progressive pipe and you put it where the sun don’t shine.”

The recent decision to allow Mamadou Soumare to return to the US, without legal documentation, after burying his wife and children, will undoubtedly cause additional furor within right-wing circles and their media spokesmen like O’Reilly.

These sentiments, no doubt shared by a significant section of the American political establishment, stand in stark contrast to the outpouring of generosity and humanity shown by thousands of New Yorkers and working people from around the country over the past week in support for the victims of last Wednesday’s fire.



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