

New Yorkers speak out about Bronx House Fire:

“It’s like the devil is running the country.”

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The social causes of the fire are not lost on the people of Highbridge, the Bronx, and New York City in general. The *World Socialist Web Site* visited the scene of the fire and interviewed a number of those from the neighborhood and from all over the city who gathered there, looking at the house with expressions of shock and horror.

A line gathered at an apartment across the street from the house with people—overwhelmingly working class—donating goods for the surviving family members. Vans pulled up periodically to deliver television sets, rugs, blankets, and mattresses.

News cameras from TV stations throughout the city were set up across the street for a press conference that apparently never happened. The attitude of the press was visibly and audibly different from that of the crowd of working class families from the city, as reporters joked and talked about sporting events. To them, it appeared to be business as usual.

Alberta Smith, 82 from Harlem, came out with her granddaughter Stacy to donate clothing and money to the family: “I just feel like I have to help these people. Just thinking about it hurts—it really hurts. I haven’t been able to sleep since this happened. A child should never have to suffer such things as this.

“You look at the way poor people have to live here, and the whole thing opens up wide. You see that those people in the White House don’t want but two classes of people—rich and poor. We have to help each other—that’s the way we’re supposed to live. If I have a quarter and someone needs it, I’m going to give it to them. The clothes that I brought here are from my closet and are clothes that I wear, not garbage that I was going to get rid of. The rich are getting richer and the poor are suffering, and they just don’t care. We have to stick together.”

Stacy added: “Mayor Bloomberg did not come to greet the family. He didn’t come to offer condolences. There are certain communities that he refuses to cooperate with, and these are all in the lower class areas. What’s wrong with the state? Why aren’t they here before us bringing aid? We’re the poor helping the poor. We came here to bring some things for the survivors. I know what it is to be burnt out by a fire. I lost pictures and clothing and everything.”

When asked about the billions spent on the Iraq war that might be used to build adequate housing, she said. “I’m totally against this war. It is mostly the poor that went over there to fight and die. They should stop what they’re doing right now.”

David R. Robinson, who lived two doors down from the house where the tragedy occurred, told the WSW, “These were people like me. You need four incomes in a family to have a house. You need a whole family working. That’s what these people were doing. The rent in this country is too high. We are forced to live like this. When is Congress going to look at people like us who live paycheck to paycheck?

“I’m a cook and not making big money. I used to be a pipe fitter at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, but that job dried up. I knew the little children that died there. I’m home at 2:30 or 3:00. I’ve asked myself if there is a god, why did this happen?

“I don’t blame the landlord. It was his family that died there. He is a decent man who works hard. A lot of what’s in the ghetto, we’re not educated. These people didn’t know what to do in a fire. They panicked. I never saw one of them with a cell phone. I don’t have a phone. If there was a fire, I’d have to run down the street to the phone booth.

“On this block, we have different types of ethnic backgrounds, and this fire has touched everybody. We need proper, decent housing. The people that own these buildings need to listen to us. We need more affordable rent. I haven’t had a raise yet at my job, and I’ve been there two years.”

Elsie, from Flushing, Queens, was also bringing donations to the survivors. “My heart goes out to them. We as a human community should help one another. I wanted to give to such a tragedy.

“These people here were looking for the American dream. They were helping each other live. This is a tragedy when people are struggling just to keep themselves warm in the winter. And there is tragedy because of the lack of education about heating and fire.”

When we asked her what it would take to change things, Elsie looked for a moment at the ruin of the house. “It will take a civil war to stop conditions like this. It will take strikes. We have to claim what’s ours. This country was founded on freedom and equality, and I don’t see it here anymore. Something’s got to give. A lot of people are frustrated. America is now the haves and the have-nots, and big business runs things the way it sees fit.”

One neighbor, Jerome, told us, “I came home from work, and noticed something. I called to my wife to get the kids. The economy is junk. We can’t afford to live. These buildings are old. I helped the family fix up the place, and it needed a lot of work. It was permanently under construction. The city told him that he couldn’t install sprinklers.

“It’s not just the Bronx. I consider the US a poor country. How can anyone claim this is a rich country when so many people live in property like that? They raise the rent so high that you can’t even live. People become homeless and go to shelters. I’ve been moving from place to place for years.

“Mother and father in a family have to work to make ends meet. Another thing that hits us hard is health care. The working poor cannot afford to get sick.

Joe, a construction worker formally from the neighborhood and now from Manhattan, told us: “For one of the richest countries in the world, I can’t understand why this happened.” Speaking of immigrant families, he said, “From the way I’m looking at this, Africans, Chinese, Spanish have to pool their money together and live in crowded houses. They have to accept what they can get. The rent is just crazy. You can’t do it alone.”

“I’m a construction worker and see stuff that contractors get away with. We need more inspectors, to begin with. A lot of work is not done up to code, and I’m talking about major apartment buildings, too.”

Joe reflected on the general injustice of American society. He had been incarcerated and spoke about the way ex-prisoners are denied the right to vote. “We did our time, but we’re still denied our rights. But, we ask ourselves, if we did have the right, who would we vote for?”

Joyce Dixon and Sharon Nightengale are nursing students from the Bronx’s Montessori Hospital. Joyce spoke to the WSWs: “We came out here because this tragedy really touched us, so many lives lost and most of them children. The pain that these families are going through is unimaginable. This should never have to happen.

“There should be inspectors like they have for big commercial buildings that inspect apartment buildings to make sure they are safe, she added. “The only time any kind of inspector comes around is to give someone a fine for having dirt or garbage outside. When there’s a fire, it’s all on you.”

Joyce continued: “We are all working poor around here, and if we need assistance with anything, they say something like ‘you make 50 cents too much and are not eligible.’ The working poor are not really eligible for anything, and that’s why you have families with 17 kids in a single household.”

Sharon added: “This was a 100-year-old house with no sprinkler system, no safety inspection and no fire escape. If there were just a sprinkler system in the house, this never would have happened. They should make them mandatory in old buildings like these.

“The government should pay for some of it—at least split it with the landlords or the tenants—we’ll pay half and you pay half,” she said. “How much could it cost for saving lives like these?”

“They spend so much money for other things. How much are they spending on the war in Iraq, and we have no place even being there. They are spending billions, and here we have homeless and uneducated and the working poor struggling. This is the working poor, and they get up every day and go to work and live from paycheck to paycheck”.

Sharon added, “They’ll publicize this for a few days and then just forget about it. They don’t really like to publicize poverty. We had to listen to talk about Anna Nicole Smith’s DNA for an entire month, but the most important things don’t get covered—poverty, health care, education.

“I personally don’t give a damn about Ana Nicole Smith’s DNA—I want to hear about things that really matter. This will be on the news now, and then it will die out and nothing will change.”

Stephen Kakrada, an engineer for New York City Transit, and Matilda Ankugah, a health care worker, came to the neighborhood to give support:

“We’re from Ghana, neighbors with Mali, and we’re here all struggling for the American dream,” said Stephen. “When something like this happens, it affects us all—we all share the pain. These are poor people in poor living conditions. The war in Iraq is dragging on and on with no end in sight, draining the US of money that should be spent on housing and education.”

Tom Hall, a piano teacher at PS 2 in the Bronx, came to see the house with a group of his students: “I’ve been feeling like I need to come here to see this. I just wanted to wait until the media storm died down. New York for the last 40 years has really been a tale of two cities.

“The neighborhood here is very mixed with immigrants, and you see how poverty is an equal opportunity annihilator. Things like this happen, and it kind of makes me wish I weren’t an American, it’s so shameful.

The comment from Mayor Bloomberg really offended me—when asked why he wasn’t around, his response was that he was not a firefighter or a social worker and it’s not his job to find housing for people.

“This struck me as coming from a person who is completely morally and emotionally bankrupt—to say such a thing about these families. If it was one cop’s family, he would have been all over it. People have been saying that he’s distant from the poor, but this personally really offended me.

“The Yankees stepped up because this is the Bronx. But who else has said or done anything? What has Trump said? The people who work in his buildings, the scrubbers and the doormen, are the people who live in here. These are the working people.”

“You look at the war in Iraq—now there’s a real tragedy for you. Just do the math—\$189 billion here, and additional hundred billion there. What’s left to spend on housing and other programs? But I have to say that if they weren’t spending the money over there, they would be spending it on other ways to enrich the rich at the expense of the poor—more tax breaks to the corporations or something like that.”

Gwen, who has lived in the neighborhood since 1966, said, “There were too many people living in that house. It’s all about saving money. There aren’t good jobs, that’s the biggest reason why. People don’t have the skills they need to find the right kind of work. I think education is the key. There should be programs to help people go to college. But it’s like health care: the government is cutting all the programs for the poor. The elected officials talk and talk.”

Raymond Ortega from the Bronx had come to look at the fire-gutted home. He remarked on the generosity of the people he saw coming with food and clothing for the survivors.

He told the WSWs: “I’m pretty sure that if this was a rich neighborhood like midtown Manhattan, the house would have been 100 percent safe. But if you live in the Bronx, they don’t care how you have to live.

“How can you have so many kids in a building with no fire escape? Why does a woman have to jump out of a third-floor window? I live in a house like this one. I saw this on TV, and I came down to look at it. I have baseball bats in every single room of my house, in case I have to break the windows if there’s a fire and jump.

“That’s how we live in the Bronx. I’ve had to teach my kids how to jump out of a window without getting hurt. That’s our fire safety plan.”

How much rent did he pay for his apartment, the WSWs asked. “Eleven-hundred dollars a month for two bedrooms in an old house in a high-tech city like New York. I’m in the same position as these people. This could happen to me. A lot of people are not educated about smoke detectors. The instructions are only in English, so some immigrants can’t read them. And if you can’t pay the light bill, you’re seeing with candles, and that is very dangerous.

“It gets cold. The windows are not properly sealed. In my house, you can feel the draft, and here the government is in Iraq fighting a war for oil. It’s like the devil’s running this country.”



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