

Death of Detroit firefighter: victim of a city's social decay

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Firefighter Walter Harris

On Friday, November 21, a funeral service attended by close to 3,000 people was held for Detroit firefighter Walter Harris, who died fighting a fire in an abandoned home. His death testifies to the social decay that has taken place in Detroit and cities like it, large and small, across the US.

Walter Harris died early Saturday morning, November 15, when a roof collapsed on him and two other men in his squad as they fought a house fire on Detroit's east side.

Responding to the fire, Harris and two other firefighters went into the building and continued to the second floor in search of possible victims, including squatters who often frequent abandoned buildings in the city. In what has been designated as the poorest large city in the US, it is not unusual for abandoned buildings to be occupied by the homeless, those on drugs or even families with children who are simply trying to survive.



The house on the east side of Detroit where Walter Harris died

firefighters were hospitalized with injuries sustained in the fire. Attempts to resuscitate Harris failed as fellow firefighters fought to save his life on the way to the hospital. "He was right next to me," said firefighter Jeff Hamm to the *Detroit News*. "I don't know how I am here."

Harris, 37 and the father of six, had worked in the Detroit Fire Department for 17 years. A resident of Sterling Heights, a Detroit suburb, he was to have been promoted to sergeant in the coming weeks. Over six feet tall and 270 pounds, he was known for his dedication and for setting an example to his fellow firefighters.

On the day of his death, Harris was battling what has become an almost routine fire for men at the Squad 3/Engine 23 Firehouse, which is located near the massive but crumbling old Packard auto factory. According to several firemen in attendance at the funeral, Engine 23 is one of the busiest firehouses in Detroit, a city with one of the busiest fire departments in the country.



Abandoned house on Detroit's east side

Detroit fire investigators have determined that the fire that claimed Harris's life was caused by arson. According to several firefighters spoken to by the WSWS at his funeral, Detroit has a severe problem with arson fires in abandoned buildings. Fire investigators have determined that half of all fires in the city in 2007 were ruled suspicious, indicating that they could not find a cause, with many of those assumed to be deliberately set.

Detroit has a phenomenal 62,000 abandoned or vacant homes throughout the city, with a large proportion of these on the city's east side. In the area where the November 15 fire took

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place, at East Kirby and Sheridan, the economic decline is starkly visible.

According to the US Census, Detroit is the poorest large city in the US. The number of people living in poverty grew from 32.5 percent in 2006 to 33.8 percent in 2007.

Kurt Metzger, former director of research for United Way for Southeastern Michigan, spoke to the WSWS on the social conditions in Detroit and nearby Highland Park. Metzger is presently the director of the Detroit-Area Community Indicators System.

"I can't imagine how bad the situation is now," Metzger told the WSWS. "With all of the foreclosures, with renters that are being foreclosed on, they are just being thrown out there. And there is nobody following where these people are ending up."

"I think a lot of them are probably trying to move into some of these empty homes, which have been stripped and certainly don't have any utilities," Metzger added. "As bad as the situation is, I think that any estimates would probably underestimate what the real numbers are."

The devastation that has overtaken large parts of Detroit is a direct result of the shutdown of the majority of auto plants in the city, and the resulting unemployment and poverty. The vacant houses predominating in many neighborhoods, most of them old and wood framed, were once occupied and well maintained--the pride of a city that once boasted the largest single-family home ownership rate in the country.

Cuts in the city budget have also had a debilitating effect on the ability of firefighters to fight fires. According to the *Detroit News*, city officials routinely deactivate fire rigs each day because of manpower and money shortages. As a result, more work is shifted onto fewer firefighters



Larry Porter speaks with Lt. David McKalpain, retired, of the Firefighters' Honor Guard

Retired Lt. David McKalpain of the Detroit Fire Department told the WSWS that Harris went to work at the Engine 23 Firehouse because of the challenges it posed. "He wanted to go to one of the busiest stations because that's Walter," stated McKalpain. "He went to one of the busiest areas on the east side of Detroit because that's the kind of guy he was. He was just a wonderful person. He would do anything for you."

Walter Harris was an avid motorcyclist and a member of the Axemen motorcycle club, a fraternity of firemen who ride motorcycles. Rey Palacios, a member of the Axemen in

Brooklyn, New York, attended Harris's funeral to express his solidarity with a fallen comrade.



Larry Porter speaks with Rey Palacios

Palacios said he met Harris two years ago and always thought highly of him. He said New York faced budget cuts similar to those in Detroit. "Just look at the economy," he said. "Talk about cutbacks, it's going to happen to everybody." Palacios said stations had been closed. "Everyone is carrying out cuts--New York, Detroit, Canada, everywhere."

In April 2008, the *Detroit News* featured Harris in a video posted on their web site. In the video, the firefighters are obviously angry about the conditions in the city and the decay caused by the massive job cuts by the automakers. Sgt. Mike Nevin, Harris's colleague at the Engine 23 Firestation, comments, "You wonder what happened to the Motor City. GM, Chrysler, they are all picking up and leaving. But the people are still here. When factories go they don't take the people with them."

Harris states that firefighters are overworked and stretched thin. Pictured in his gear and pointing to the social decay around him, Harris says, "It breaks your heart. It breaks your heart. I'm sure that every guy here will say the same thing, it breaks your heart. All of these here would do everything they can for the people in this city."



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