US: The social and historical roots of the Highland Park fire tragedy

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A house fire in Highland Park, Michigan killed three young children and their aunt on October 22. Orlando “Dewey” Glover, 11, Zeryha Dale, 9, Melvin “Petey” Turner, 5, and Josephine Dale, 51, died in the blaze. Fire inspectors have stated that the cause of the fire cannot be determined due to the total destruction of the house.

Shrine to the victims at the site of the fire, still maintained by neighbors

DTE, the energy giant that delivers both gas and electricity to Highland Park, had suspended utility service long before the Dales moved in. As a result, the family was likely forced into using some unsafe method to heat their home or cook.

Because of high utility costs and growing poverty and joblessness, utility monopolies suspend electrical and heating services to an increasing number of working class families. Out of necessity, families like the Dales are compelled to make difficult and dangerous decisions in order to heat and illuminate their homes, using candles and gas lamps for light, propane tanks for cooking, unsafe fires and space heaters for heat, or else illegally tapping into the power grid for electricity.

Whatever the immediate cause of the October 22 fire, the true source of the tragedy is the impoverishment of Highland Park and areas like it across the country, and a social system—capitalism—that makes the distribution of basic human necessities such as heat, water, and electricity a source of profit for the wealthy. It can be predicted with some assurance that in the coming winter months the suspension of power and water to working class families will result in more senseless deaths.

Social conditions in Highland Park

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed local residents about social conditions in their city. Reporters also spoke with Kurt Metzger, a demographer and statistician who works for City Connect Detroit, a non-profit organization that gathers data on social conditions in the Detroit area (See the video: "The rise and fall of Highland Park, Michigan").

Metzger explained that dire social conditions in Highland Park have created a situation in which almost anyone who has the means of leaving does so. This has left behind a city that is extremely poor, and overwhelmingly black (more than 94 percent).

Highland Park’s population has declined from 20,121 in 1990, to just under 16,000 today. Its highest population was reached in 1930, when 53,000 people lived in the city. As late as the 1970s, over 30,000 people still lived in the city.

In 2000, median income was $17,737, well under half of the national median of $41,994. Metzger believes that the proportion now living in poverty is likely well above 50 percent. This represents a sharp increase since 2000, when just over 32 percent of all families and 38 percent of all individuals in Highland Park lived below the poverty level, compared to a national average of 9.2 percent and 12.4 percent, respectively.

Unemployment is high. A young worker told the WSWS that neither he nor his father is employed, and “not too many people I know have jobs.” Statistics in an area like Highland Park are seriously misleading. Metzger said that the official rate unemployment is 22 percent, but taking into account so-called “discouraged workers” this figure would double. According to the 2000 census, only 46.2 percent of the adult population over the age of 16 was considered part of the labor force, compared to a national average for the same age group of 63.9 percent.

Once a center of the auto industry, as of 1999 only 17.4 percent of Highland Park workers were employed in the census category of “Production, transportation, and material moving occupations.” Layoffs in the auto industry have mounted sharply since 1999.

Even though Highland Park is surrounded on three sides by Detroit, making it a central urban area, its residents are forced to commute great distances to find work, traveling on average 32.2 minutes, compared to a national average of 25.5 minutes. Less than 20 percent of these Highland Park workers could use public transportation to get to work. About three quarters used vehicles—another significant expense. But despite the fact that a large share of the city’s workforce was dependent upon cars to get to work, 39.9 percent of all households had no vehicle in 1999. In other words, those without cars are condemned to unemployment.

Scenes like this are common in the streets of Highland Park.

A large share of houses stand vacant—about 15 percent according to the most recent data available. Due to evictions and foreclosures, some destitute people, including families, attempt to occupy the abandoned

housing, much of which is gutted on the inside and unsafe. A Detroit firefighter recently died fighting a blaze in just such a house, entering the structure fearing that a family might have been squatting inside. (See “Death of Detroit firefighter: victim of a city’s social decay”) Housing is old. Over 42 percent of all housing structures were built before 1939; another 34.5 percent were built before 1959. As of 1999, only 8.1 percent of all structures had been built after 1980.

A neighbor of the family that perished in the October 22 fire told WSWS reporters that a majority of the homes in the area are without basic utilities. A spokesman for DTE said the energy company does not keep statistics on the number of homes without utilities, or even the number of suspensions it has carried out in the area.

The city suffers for want of basic human services. Residents say the fire and police departments do not provide adequate service, and there are no safety or fire inspections. The fire at the Dale home was compounded by the fact that the nearby fire hydrant lacked sufficient water pressure to extinguish the flames. While a functioning hydrant may not have saved the Dales, it likely would have prevented the destruction of the three neighboring houses.

This hydrant didn’t have enough water pressure to contain the fire.

Residents told the WSWS that the malfunctioning water main has not been repaired. One man explained that a ruptured central water main is openly visible several feet under the ground. Money was found, however, to fix another water main in June—one that serves two local businesses: Budco, a marketing firm, and a large liquor store. Democratic State Senator Martha Scott announced the $250,000 grant to fund the repair, secured from Michigan’s Core Communities Fund.

In addition to Budco and a number of marginal businesses, there is now a strip mall in Highland Park and there has been some business development in the area of the old Chrysler plant. But residents say that the businesses will not hire local residents and that they contribute little to the local economy. Budco, for example, was wooed to Highland Park in 2000 with a 12-year, 50 percent property-tax abatement.

The city’s library, housed in a beautiful historic edifice, has been closed down since 2003 for lack of funding. “That’s a beautiful building. The architecture on that building is beautiful,” a young resident told us. “The foundation is still good. It’s just waiting for someone to come and renovate it, but nobody does.”

Local residents also complain that it is difficult to get social services assistance from Michigan’s Department of Human Services (DHS). Josephine Dale’s neighbor, Betty, said she had spoken to her the day before she died. DHS had recently rejected Josephine’s paperwork requesting a voucher to purchase a bed. Betty explained that Josephine—who reentered the burning house in an attempt to save the children—“was the most giving person” she knew.

Betty, a neighbor and friend of Josephine Dale, also without utilities

Betty, a disabled worker, said she gets only $15 a month in food stamps. She lives without gas and electricity. Her utilities were suspended because she could not pay a $425 bill in its entirety. Betty said that she and others attempt to pay as much as they can.

The historical roots of decline

Conditions in Highland Park provide a microcosm of the rise and decline of heavy industry, and especially auto manufacturing, in the US. The poor living conditions prevailing there can be seen in Detroit, St. Louis, Gary (Indiana), and countless cities and towns across the country.

It was not always so.

Residents recalled that Highland Park was once known as “the city of trees,” and Metzger confirmed that it had been well known for its high quality of life. “Highland Park had the best school system in the country. Between Highland Park, Flint, and Pontiac, three areas that have seen enormous disinvestment, they were at the pinnacle of community education, their school systems were tremendous, they were in the top in terms of income.” One resident recalled how “the streets and houses used to be immaculate.”

As late as 1970, there were still 34,000 jobs in Highland Park, according to Metzger, which means that workers actually commuted to the city. According to a 2005 estimate, only 5,400 jobs remained in the city. An unemployed worker said that “there used to plants all up and down Victor Street. They all moved out. There used to be a Sears [department store]

here too. Everybody moved out." Other residents said that the jobs that remain are low paying, and not available to local residents.

When Henry Ford built his first plant here in 1909, Highland Park was an unincorporated village. It was here that Ford introduced the automated assembly line to auto production. Previously, cars were assembled in only a few stages. Now, a moving conveyor belt advanced a car in a line with workers located on either side who performed perhaps only one single function in the course of the day. The entire labor process was broken up into its minute constituent elements.

The assembly line heralded an enormous expansion of the productivity and wealth of American capitalism. Ford sought to inculcate loyalty in his workforce by offering, beginning in the 1920s, what were some of the highest wages available to workers—the famous "$5 dollar day." Though in reality the pay was limited, assembly line production advanced the concept that workers should be able to afford the products they produce. It should be noted that Ford's "generosity" was coupled with corporate espionage against militant workers.

Ford quit production of his one-model Model T lineup in 1927, gradually relocating his operations to the River Rouge plant—then one of the world's largest factories. The Highland Park plant closed in the late 1950s, but much of the industry that had developed in the city remained. Chrysler, the nation's third largest auto manufacturer, took the city as its corporate center.

In the late 1930s, the auto workers in Southeast Michigan organized, through militant struggle, the United Auto Workers union—-in the face of bitter opposition by the auto corporations and Henry Ford. Socialist workers led and inspired many of these struggles. The UAW was a new sort of union. It did not seek to organize this or that trade within a plant, but rather the entire workforce. It soon established itself as the most important union of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and set an example in struggle for other unions throughout the country.

The bureaucrats who came to run the unions, however, supported by the Communist Party USA, ensured that the labor movement remained politically subordinated to the Democratic Party in the 1930s and 1940s. In the long run, this would prove fatal. As part of this political alliance, the UAW, along with the whole AFL-CIO union federation (formed in 1955), accepted the profit system. In the 1950s, the unions carried out a purge of socialist-minded militants from their ranks.

For a time, the enormous expansion of US industry—beginning in World War II and lasting until the late 1960s-—allowed for a certain class compromise between industry and the unions. Through sharp struggles, a section of American workers, particularly auto workers, were able to win relatively high wages with good benefits for life. In the 1950s, when Detroit dominated world auto production, workers realized a standard of living unheard of for industrial workers. This was the high point for cities like Highland Park, Flint, Pontiac, and Detroit.

Other processes, however, were already at work. The reemergence of America's capitalist rivals, especially Germany and Japan, began to slowly cut into the US automakers' domination of the world market. The auto executives, chastened by the militancy of the autoworkers that they believed arose from the enormous centrally-located factories, began to farm out production, assembly, and parts manufacture to areas distant from Detroit.

In response, the UAW bureaucracy was transformed from an instrument for defending the interests of workers within the framework of capitalism, into an instrument for imposing concessions on the workers. The UAW endorsed parts relocation, and assisted the Big Three in targeting the most militant workers and factories for closure, many of which were located in the central city. From the late 1970s on, the UAW collaborated in eliminating benefits at the Big Three in order to "save jobs." The disastrous results of this could not be clearer in places like Highland Park, Flint, and Detroit.

In the case of Highland Park and Hamtramck, a neighboring auto industry town, Metzger believes that the interstate highway system played a key role in their demise. The Eisenhower administration (1953-1961) launched the interstate highway system that sent thoroughfares through working class, and especially black, neighborhoods. The new highways allowed for the horizontal expansion of the cities, with new suburbs built by shifting tax revenues away from established cities and towns. By custom, these suburbs prevented the relocation of black workers. Many white workers moved out, but continued to commute back to work in Highland Park and Detroit. Later, layers of the black population who could afford to do so also left.

Industry soon followed residents. For Highland Park, the last devastating departure was Chrysler, which moved its corporate offices out of the city in 1992. Its tax base gone, Highland Park began to crumble. In 2002, the city went bankrupt, unable to meet payroll for its existing city workers or pension contributions to retired workers. Essential services stopped, including fire and police protection. Since then, city services have restarted, but at a bare-bones level. The city has reduced its crippling debt by laying off well over 60 percent of its workforce since 2003.

In the 1960s, Highland Park was one of the first cities in the country to elect a black mayor, Robert Blackwell. Like neighboring Detroit, however, the skin color of those who rule the city has done nothing to improve the lives of the city's African-American families.

Highland Park, like Detroit, has been the victim of profound historical processes tied up with the fortunes of American capitalism and the bankruptcy and decline of trade unionism. Back in the heyday of Highland Park, autoworkers set the benchmark for working class living standards. Today, American capitalism—operating through its political agents in the Democratic Party and the UAW bureaucracy—is again demanding tens of thousands of layoffs, dozens of plant closures, and the destruction of workers' living standards—to "save" the auto industry. The conditions of social destruction dominating in Highland Park give an indication of what they have in mind.