

Two men perish in Detroit house fire

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14 May 2010

Two men died in a fire in southwest Detroit on Thursday morning at a home that may have been without utilities. The circumstances that gave rise to the blaze at 5461 Central Avenue remain unclear.

Friends who stopped by the house around 11:00 a.m. told the *World Socialist Web Site* that one of the men was named Antonio Andreas. They said that Andreas, apparently in his mid-50s and originally from Mexico, had recently purchased the home and was living without heat or electricity.

Eric, one of Andreas's friends, had not even known of the tragedy until he arrived at the home. He and others had been coming by every day for the past week to help Andreas fix up his new residence. Yesterday, they arrived to smoldering ruins.

Eric said that the second individual who perished was an acquaintance of Andreas and was staying with him temporarily. He did not know his name and was upset at not having any means to contact his family. A neighbor added that he thought the unidentified individual was in his 30s.

Another of Andreas's friends, visibly anguished by what happened, said that he had been told by the fire station that a candle was the cause of the fire.

Eric, who spoke with the WSWs about the outrageous price of utilities and the horrific consequences of shutoffs, thought the candle was being used for light.

The Detroit Fire Department could not confirm this report. It told the WSWs that thus far the cause of the blaze has yet to be determined. An arson unit was sent to the location on Thursday to investigate.

A DTE utility worker in a truck passing by told the WSWs that he had looked at the home's power hookup earlier that day. While the original DTE meter was no longer installed and had been replaced with another, he

said that the connection itself appeared safe and doubted that this could have sparked the fire.

When contacted, John Austerberry, a spokesman for DTE, would not confirm if there was any utility service at the home. He said that he would have to discuss with his department whether or not DTE would continue to speak with the *World Socialist Web Site*. As of 5:00 p.m. on Thursday, the WSWs had not received a return call.

The lack of clarity surrounding the circumstances of the blaze at 5461 Central Avenue did not, however, prevent the *Detroit Free Press* from publishing an article on Thursday morning claiming that the men who perished were "squatting" at the home with an illegal hookup to the power grid.

The article, "2 squatters die in Detroit house fire" by Tammy Stables Battaglia, reports that a fire took place "in what was supposed to be a vacant duplex at 5361 Central." In addition to the fact that the author got the address wrong, she did not bother to verify whether the men who perished were actually "squatters" before going to print.

For its part, the *Detroit News* similarly reported, "It appears the victims were squatting in the home, fire officials said." However, the reporter, Santiago Esparza, then went on to undermine the accuracy of his own statement just a few paragraphs later. He notes that a neighbor said that she thought the men had recently purchased the house and were doing maintenance on the home, staying there while working on the repairs.

The sole purpose of such shoddy reporting is to malign the victims. The suggestion is: Why should anyone care about what happens to "squatters" and people with "illegal" hookups? Their deaths might be regrettable, but hardly anything worth a serious investigation, much less an inquiry into whether a utility shutoff played a part in the blaze.

Inability to pay exorbitant utility bills is a common

problem among local residents. Every passerby and neighbor with whom the WSWS spoke indicated that they too were having problems with excessively high bills and shutoffs.

A young woman living across the street from the house where Wednesday's fire occurred told the WSWS that she had just received her second shutoff notice from DTE. Despite the fact that she has a newborn baby at home, the utility company will not put her on a payment plan that will reduce her monthly bills and allow her to maintain service. The reason is that the last time she was on such a plan, she missed one payment and was thus kicked off and made ineligible for similar assistance for a year's time. Last month the woman received a \$1,500 bill. This month she received another for \$600.

In the postal zip code where this latest blaze occurred, 40.7 percent of residents live below the federal poverty line, with 19 percent earning less than half this amount, according to the web site city-data.com. While the neighborhood appears to be relatively well maintained, there are numerous houses on the blocks surrounding the Andreas home that have clearly been the site of fires or are simply disintegrating.

This area, which includes black, white and Hispanic workers, was once a thriving industrial center in Detroit. Both the Cadillac assembly plant and the Fleetwood Fisher Body Plant, which collectively employed several thousand workers, used to operate nearby. The area was decimated by the closure of these General Motors facilities in 1987.

The Socialist Equality Party is leading a campaign in opposition to utility shutoffs, which are resulting in numerous deaths and misery for hundreds of thousands of households across Michigan and the country. The Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) was formed in an effort to mobilize working people throughout the region in a united struggle against the subordination of basic human needs for light and heat to the profit motive. To join CAUS, click here.



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