

Fire in abandoned New Orleans warehouse kills 8

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Eight people perished in a fire in an abandoned warehouse in New Orleans' 9th Ward early Tuesday morning. It is believed all the victims were squatting in the building trying to keep warm in the unseasonably cold weather.

The tragic incident is the most deadly fire in New Orleans—the largest city in the US state of Louisiana—since a June 1973 fire in a French Quarter bar killed 32.

The New Orleans Fire Department was called to the two-alarm blaze at 2827 N. Prieur St. at just before 2:00 a.m. Tuesday morning, local time. Firefighters were not able to bring the fire under control until about 2:30 a.m., by which time the wood and corrugated metal building had burned to its foundation.

The bodies of the victims were charred beyond recognition. Authorities were unable to immediately determine their identities or gender. The remains of two dogs were also found at the scene. Cadaver dogs were to be brought in at daylight to search for other victims.

Friends and acquaintances who gathered at the site of the fire later Tuesday to mourn the young victims described them as “wanderers” seeking an alternative lifestyle, attracted by the abundance of abandoned buildings in New Orleans.

Jacquetta Evans, a homeless woman who is currently living in her car in the Upper 9th Ward, told the WSWs, “If they weren’t homeless, they wouldn’t be deceased. I’m homeless too. Maybe if they were in a house they’d be alive today. They was real good people. I mean real good. If I could help them, I would. Because I know how it feels to be hungry.”

A man and a woman who had been in the building when the fire began narrowly escaped through a window. They told firefighters that the people in the warehouse had been burning wood in a large barrel to keep warm as the temperature dipped just below freezing overnight.

The Associated Press reported that the man, who didn’t want to be identified, told Red Cross worker Tom Butler that he heard someone screaming and trying to get out, but that smoke had stopped him from reentering the building.

One of the survivors told firefighters that most of the people staying in the building were in their teens and early 20s. At least some of the victims may have been unconscious when the fire broke out. Fire Department spokesman Greg Davis said they may have succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning, a result of burning wood in an enclosed structure. The building had no utilities.

Fire Chief Charles Parent told local television that the victims’ bodies had been turned over to the coroner’s office. Later yesterday, some of the victims’ families had begun the horrible task of identifying their loved ones.

While the death toll from the blaze was the highest in a single fire incident in New Orleans in almost four decades, the conditions at the scene were a disaster waiting to happen. The building where the eight young people gathered to seek shelter and warmth was among several dilapidated metal, brick and wooden buildings alongside railroad tracks with standing, graffiti-scrawled freight cars.

More than five years since Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, the city’s 9th Ward remains in shambles. The storm caused massive damage to houses in the area, forcing many to abandon

their homes and move elsewhere. Of those who have returned, many still wait on grants to rebuild, living in FEMA trailers parked in their yards or driveways, fearful to leave their property lest it be vandalized or seized by authorities.

According the Brookings Institution, the homeless population in New Orleans has doubled since Katrina hit, and is now estimated at about 12,000. Zack Rosenburg, co-founder of the St. Bernard Project, which helps rebuild homes in New Orleans, told *Newsweek*, “There are also about 6,000 families who own homes but can’t afford to rebuild them. So they live in gutted houses or partially rebuilt homes, or else live in rentals that they can’t sustain. Some simply double up with family members.”

The homeless without such options often seek refuge in abandoned structures like the one on N. Prieur St. Sister Frances of the St. Bernard Project commented to the WWSW on Tuesday’s tragedy, “I’m not surprised. Services in the area are almost nonexistent. There are homeless shelters, places like the Salvation Army, but you have to have money for public transportation to get to them.”

Jerry Bierria lives with his son in the Upper 9th Ward in a FEMA trailer in the driveway of his damaged home. He lost his job with Charity Hospital, and is currently unemployed. St. Bernard is helping him repair his home.

“They could do better for the homeless, to help people,” he told the WWSW. “They could hire some of the unemployed and homeless people to rebuild things around here, there’s so much to be done. It’s not just in New Orleans, it’s all over the country. There’s a lot of young people unemployed.

“I was laid off from the hospital in March 2006, and I missed re-orientation when my brother was ill, so they took me off the list. They are spending \$600 million to rebuild Charity, but it seems like there’s nothing for things that people need. There’s a lot of unnecessary politics.”

Bierra added, “I’m living here in the trailer, in my driveway, because I don’t want anyone to take my property. There’s all this homelessness, all these blighted properties. They could give the unemployed jobs—the carpenters and the others—to fix it up.”

“They want to build things up in the city for the rich to come,” he said, “but they don’t want to help the

average poor people.” The state’s Road Home program, which allocates federal Community Development Block Grant funds to help rebuild homes, is based on pre-Katrina property values, skewing resources in favor of wealthier homes and neighborhoods.

Working class Louisiana families increasingly struggle to find decent, affordable housing. The state’s average hourly wage for renters is \$11.49 an hour, which means a renter needs to work and be paid for 50 hours, 52 weeks of the year to afford a two-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent (FMR)—\$746 a month—along with other expenses. For the unemployed, those earning the minimum wage (\$6.55/hour), or those on public assistance (earning roughly \$475/month), an apartment at FMR is out of reach.

That the victims of the Upper 9th Ward fire tragedy were apparently in their teens and 20s is an exposure of the growth of poverty, unemployment and homelessness among the nation’s youth and families, in New Orleans and beyond.

Louisiana has the highest rate of child homelessness of the 50 US states, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness. Of the estimated 300,000 Louisiana children living below the official poverty level—set at just over \$22,000 for a family of four—a staggering 68 out of every 100 of these poor children, or about 204,000, are homeless.

The recessionary crisis has also seen a jump in the number of homeless families across the US. The US Conference of Mayors 2010 Status Report on Hunger & Homelessness recently reported a 9 percent increase in homelessness over the past year. As a direct result of the deteriorating economy, increasing numbers of families—both those with jobs and without—are losing their homes to foreclosure or are unable to make rent payments.



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