

The New Orleans fire and the conditions of youth in America

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Five young men and three young women perished in a fire in an abandoned warehouse early Tuesday morning in New Orleans after lighting a fire to keep warm in the freezing temperatures. Flames engulfed the structure. Before firefighters could extinguish the blaze they were all dead, their bodies burned beyond recognition.

“They were all amazing, beautiful, accomplished people,” Audrey Bean, 19, told the local *Times-Picayune*. Her friend, Gwendolyn Faye, 19, said the group had turned the warehouse—which had no utilities—into a home, with beds and cooking facilities. Rachel Park, 27, said those who died were artists, welders, musicians; some had plans to open a bicycle collective.

The deadly blaze—the worst in New Orleans in almost four decades—was one of six such fires across the metropolitan area that night. It serves as a grim exposure of the worsening plight of the homeless, and of the desperate conditions facing young people in particular.

The state of New Orleans, one of the country’s most important cities, economically and culturally, is a devastating indictment of the American political and social system. The flooding of the city in 2005 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina—a product of the systematic neglect of basic infrastructure, including the city’s levees—left nearly 2,000 people dead and drove hundreds of thousands from their homes.

Five years later, homelessness in New Orleans has doubled, to an estimated 12,000 individuals. According to advocates for the homeless, on any given night there are only 800 beds for some 3,000 people who are unable to find somewhere to sleep. About 55,000 blighted properties continue to mar neighborhoods, particularly in the 9th Ward, one of the areas worst

affected from flooding.

At least some of the young people who died in Tuesday morning’s fire had traveled to New Orleans, attracted by its history, music and culture. In the years since the hurricane disaster, however, the city has not been rebuilt—at least not for its working class population. While wealthier areas and lucrative French Quarter businesses have been revitalized, unemployment, poverty and homelessness have worsened.

In the state of Louisiana as a whole, a staggering 300,000 children live in poverty. According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, more than 204,000 of these poor children experience homelessness each year. The US as a whole has seen a dramatic rise in family homelessness, with the US Conference of Mayors reporting a 9 percent overall increase in the number of homeless families in the US in the past year.

Mirroring the deepening recession, the face of homelessness is changing. Corporations have exploited mass unemployment to drive down wages and eliminate benefits—meaning that more and more people who have jobs still cannot afford a home. The Working Poor Families Project found that in 2009 some 45 million people, including 2 million children, lived in low-income working families.

Young people in their teens and 20s are one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. Cities like New Orleans, San Francisco, Seattle and Portland, Oregon, are struggling to provide services. In Seattle, the 27-bed young adult shelter ROOTS expects to turn away youth more than 2,000 times this year, 10 times more than five years ago. Portland saw the young adult segment of homeless increase by 25 percent last year, more than double the overall increase for all age

groups.

Children aging out of foster care at 18 years old comprise another rapidly increasing part of the homeless population. According to a report by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the number of those children turning 18 in the care of the state, who have not been adopted, increased by 41 percent from 1998 to 2005. About 20,000 young people age out of foster care every year; one in five of these will be homeless after two years.

If a society can be measured by the conditions of its youth, the plight of young people points to the deep decay of American capitalism. New Orleans is a microcosm of the nation as a whole. Even as fantastic wealth has been accumulated by a small layer of the population, the conditions facing the vast majority of the population are deteriorating at an astonishing rate.

For the first time in the modern history of the United States, the younger generation today is worse off than their parents. What do young people have to look forward to? They confront an abysmal job situation—characterized by unemployment or poverty-level wages. Home ownership is also far less attainable. Those graduating from college or university will most likely be saddled with thousands of dollars in student debt that they may never be able to repay.

A recent Rutgers University study demonstrates that the experiences of increasing numbers of Americans have led them to believe that the “American Dream”—one of the principal ideological justifications for US capitalism—is out of reach of the vast majority of people in this country. Fifty-seven percent of those surveyed in “The Shattered American Dream: Unemployed Workers Lose Ground, Hope, and Faith in their Futures” believe that “hard work does not guarantee success.”

The study interviewed 1,202 people who had been unemployed at some point between September 2008 and August 2009. Just one-third of those surveyed believe they will recover financially to where they were before the economic downturn; 61 percent did not expect to get back to “their prior economic station in life.” Almost half said they were in “flat-out poor financial shape.”

Among those aged 18-34, 51 percent said the economic downturn has had a major impact on their family, and 41 percent said they were in poor financial shape.

Notably, in the most recent set of interviews in the Rutgers survey in November 2010, 61 percent felt that “government should do more to solve problems.” This sentiment, shared by ordinary Americans, both young and old, stands in stark opposition to the entire direction of the political establishment, led by the Obama administration, which offers no relief for the working class and has rejected out of hand any government jobs program.

After bailing out the banks and securing tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, the government is now shifting even more decisively toward austerity. Federal social programs are being slashed. Public education is under attack. At the state level, massive budget deficits are leading to unprecedented cuts in basic services. Conditions are only getting worse.

This situation cannot but provoke a social explosion—not least among America’s youth.

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