

Utility shutoff leads to three deaths in Oakland, California apartment fire

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22 January 2011

At around 2 a.m. on December 30, a fire broke out at an apartment in Oakland, California, killing three and leaving only one survivor. The fire was sparked by an overloaded extension cord used to provide heat and electricity from a downstairs apartment after power had been cut off upstairs.

Ruth Mejia and her two daughters, Alisson and Ivonne, along with her live-in boyfriend, Guillermo Reyna-Flores, were residing in the apartment when the fire erupted.

Reyna-Flores heroically rescued seven-year-old Alisson and returned to the apartment to save the others, but perished in the fire along with Mejia and three-year-old Ivonne.

Alisson's father, Nelson Benavides, was in the custody of immigration authorities when the fire broke out. He had been scheduled to be deported back to El Salvador, but this has been indefinitely delayed until a custody decision is made on his daughter.

Alisson is currently in the custody of Alameda County Social Services. Although Alisson's sister Ivonne was born in the US, and is therefore a US citizen, Allison is undocumented and may face deportation to El Salvador as well.

The WSWS spoke to the family's neighbor, Josue, a 22-year-old immigrant from Honduras. He had known the family since they moved in, saying they were "good people" who helped out others in times of need and were warm and friendly with the entire neighborhood. (Josue's comments are translated from Spanish.)

Josue shared with the WSWS an invitation he received to Alisson's 7th birthday party.

Josue referred to the fire as a "needless tragedy." He said he was angry that social services had not reunited Alisson with her father and complained of the cruel attempts of the government to deport them. "Why

don't they [the government] do something so they can be together now?"

Alfredo, a 10-year-old boy who was standing near the apartment, described the fire as "sad," saying that his sister was a friend of one of the little girls.

Like similar tragedies in the other parts of the US, the apartment fire was a direct consequence of the social and economic crisis in the US. The problems faced by working people throughout the country are concentrated in this one event: unemployment, poverty, utility shutoffs, home foreclosure, and the plight of immigrant workers.

Ruth Mejia had recently lost her job as a housekeeper and began to fall behind on bills. On December 2, PG&E turned off the family's power in the dead of winter when temperatures generally fall to the low 40s Fahrenheit. They fell even further during an unusually cold winter in Alameda County this year.

PG&E had "no comment" when contacted by the WSWS.

Out of desperation, the family connected extension cords from a downstairs apartment to use as a power source. The cord became overloaded and began setting off sparks that lit the furniture on fire, leading to the blaze. However, the apartment did not have any functioning smoke alarms that would have alerted and potentially saved the family.

These inadequacies might have been addressed by the landlord, but the apartment had only an absentee landlord: the Bank of New York Trust. The apartment had gone into foreclosure in August 2008 and was taken over from the previous owner by the bank.

Josue, the family's neighbor, said that he had never once seen anyone monitor or do work on the apartment, which remained in a permanent state of disrepair. The Bank of New York Trust had "no comment" when

contacted.

This is the just the latest instance where fire at a residence has been directly caused by the household's power being turned off. In these circumstances, residents resort to electric and kerosene space heaters, candles, or unauthorized hook-ups—a practice that energy giants cynically refer to as “energy theft.” These measures substantially increase the risk of fires breaking out, resulting in injuries and deaths. (See “The deadly consequences of utility shutoffs”)

Workers continue to face high levels of long-term unemployment, while the states are slashing social services to meet their budget deficits. The official unemployment rate in the US, which vastly underestimates real unemployment, is 9.4 percent, or 14.5 million people. Alameda County, where the Oakland fire occurred, has an official unemployment rate of 11.3 percent.



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