

On-the-spot report

House fire caused by utility shutoff kills three young children in the Bronx

Our reporters
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The shutoff of electricity to a family in the Bronx led to a house fire that killed three young brothers last Friday night. The fire occurred one day after the Con Edison utility company cut the power to the second-floor apartment because of unpaid bills.

With no electricity, the children's mother went out to the corner store to buy candles to provide light. Later that same day it was one of these candles that set the apartment on fire. A Fire Department spokesman told the press that the blaze was "caused by a candle in the kitchen."

The three children who lost their lives were 5-year-old Elijah Artis, 2-year-old Jeremiah Artis and 4-month-old Michael Turner. Their mother, identified as 25-year-old Tashika Turner, escaped with her life after running out to the second-floor apartment's fire escape holding another infant. The survivors included, in addition to the mother, a 4-year-old girl and a 4-month-old who was apparently the twin sister of one of the victims. The survivors were treated for smoke inhalation at nearby Lincoln Hospital, where the three boys were pronounced dead on arrival.

Con Ed did not dispute that the fire was caused by the decision to cut off the family's electricity. A statement by a company spokesman after the fire tragedy reflected its contempt for the working class. Spokesman Alan Drury said that the residents of the apartment where the fire took place owed "a significant amount...well into the thousands of dollars."

"We try to avoid turning service off to customers," he added. "We'll put them on payment plans to work with them to avoid turnoff, but this account had substantial arrears."

Assuming he has his numbers right, what the

company is saying is that this poor working class family owed Con Ed an amount equivalent to what its chief executive earns in a couple of hours. For want of this money, however, the lives of three young boys were snuffed out.

The latest fire tragedy took place on West 165th St. in the Highbridge section of the Bronx, only blocks from Yankee Stadium and literally around the corner from a building on Woodycrest Avenue where a fire in 2007 led to ten deaths, including those of eight children.

A WSWS reporting team went to the Bronx to speak to neighbors about the events of last Friday night and conditions in the building.

Charlotte Amakye, a neighbor who lives across the street, described how she helped rescue one of the babies from the fire. "I was standing here," she said, looking up into the fire escape of the building, "when I heard screaming from up on that fire escape. A lady was screaming and I thought it could be a fight, but she kept screaming 'help me.' Then I saw smoke coming from the window. All of a sudden I saw her with her little baby.

"Two guys rushed in through the staircase, through all the smoke. When I got the baby, she was unconscious. I rushed into the store for paper towels, something to clean the black smoke from all over her body. I started pressing her chest, and she coughed and started to throw up. That's when I knew she was alive. I took her around the corner, to Anderson Avenue where the ambulances were. I handed them the baby and saw there was another child in the car. It's all too much for me, I can't sleep at night, because I have kids. It's just so sad."

Residents explained that there are no smoke detectors

in the building. One neighbor, Christina John, said that the landlord has refused to provide a smoke alarm for the two years that she has had her apartment.

Christina said, “It is Con Ed who supplies the gas and electric to the building. When they shut off your service both the gas and the lights go. I think this building has a hundred violations or more. There are no smoke detectors in the hallways for all five flights up. All you can see is faulty wiring. When the fire happened, I couldn’t tell. I had to go out in the hallway when I thought something was wrong. After I looked around, I suddenly realized it was smoke and there was a fire.

“Then I went back in my fifth floor apartment and got my kids out so fast they couldn’t get dressed. Fortunately some Hispanic families across the street dressed my kids after we got down. But we had to climb down five stories outside on the fire escape. At 3 a.m. everyone was outside with nothing. People in the other buildings came out with food and helped. The Red Cross took our names in the laundromat and did nothing.”

There was extensive smoke and fire damage through much of the six-story building, which is home to dozens of children. The odor of smoke inside is overpowering. Many of the windows were broken during the fire response and are now boarded up. The apartments are in many cases heavily damaged, with shattered glass and broken furniture.

Residents were provided with emergency shelter for a few hours on the first night after the fire, but now have been left to fend for themselves. The landlord has refused to provide assistance, and the Red Cross reportedly told some families that their apartments were deemed livable. Some who have nowhere else to go are staying in their apartments, despite the difficult and even dangerous conditions, without gas, heat or hot water.

Joanny Rodriguez also lives in the building. “I live on the fourth floor, and I have six kids,” he told the WSWS. “One of my daughters is pregnant, but when the fire started I didn’t know. This is the third time there has been a fire in this building recently.”

“In 2009 and 2010 there were two fires in this building. The first came from a man smoking at 2 a.m. in the morning. Three weeks later another fire started on the first floor, and it was an electrical fire.

“People like me in this building have survived three

fires. Some may stay, but I am getting out. The landlord didn’t even show up after the first two fires. Con Ed is the utility provider for the building, and if they cut off your lights, they are cutting off your heat at the same time. I don’t know if it is illegal to cut off someone’s light and heat in the cold months of the year, but I know there are other tenants in the building who do not have light or heat.”

Fires caused directly or indirectly by utility shutoffs are common in the US, especially in the most impoverished urban areas. A spate of such fires in Detroit led to the formation of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS), which was organized by the Socialist Equality Party several years ago and has campaigned for utility access as a basic right of the working class.



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