

Fatal Bronx fire exposes appalling social conditions

Dan Brennan
29 October 2013

The horrific fire that engulfed a Bronx apartment complex Friday evening and killed three young children has exposed the miserable conditions of life facing a large section of the working class in New York City.

From the immediate cause—the use of candles after a utility shutoff—to the lack of aid in the aftermath of the fire for residents smoked out of their apartments, the tragedy has demonstrated that the gap between the immense wealth of the city's super-rich and the impoverishment of millions of working class New Yorkers has never been greater.

The local power company, Consolidated Edison, cut service just one day before the fire. For the Fortune 500 company that pulled in over a billion dollars in profits last year, utility shutoffs are routine. According to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*, so far this year Con Ed has turned off power to 67,000 customers due to outstanding bills. For Tashika Turner, forced to turn to candles as a means of providing light for her family, Con Ed's brutal policy became a death sentence for three of her children.

In the Highbridge section of the Bronx, where the fire took place, poverty is widespread. Median household income is under \$23,000 and poverty rates exceed 45 percent.

Bronx-wide, nearly half of all working adults are employed in low-wage jobs, earning less than \$13 an hour. Nonetheless, it is rare to find any apartment, no matter the condition, that rents for less than \$1,000 a month in Highbridge or elsewhere in New York City. Many people have little choice but to live in unsafe conditions, such as those in the building that erupted into flames last Friday. It is common for millions of people to choose each month between paying rent, putting food on the table or paying utility bills.

Highbridge residents can, however, peer down on Yankee Stadium, where over \$400 million in public subsidies and nearly a billion dollars in tax-exempt bonds were allocated to construct the new ballpark in 2009.

Residents of the Highbridge apartment complex gave *World Socialist Web Site* reporters a tour of the badly damaged building, pointing out fire hazards that have persisted for years. Smoke detectors are absent throughout much of the building.

For over two years, Christina John has lived in a one-bedroom apartment with her two children without a smoke alarm. Her neighbor, Stephanie Roland, said that only this year did she receive a smoke detector.

The buzzers at the entrance to the apartment building are broken, so there is no way to immediately notify all of the building's residents of a fire or other emergency. Absent a warning system, the first sign of danger on Friday was the appearance of smoke.

Christina told the WSWS she was lucky enough to escape with her two girls, ages one and five, after smelling smoke coming through the hallway door. She climbed down the fire escape with her two children in hand from the fifth floor, despite suffering from a torn ligament in her knee.

The fire, the third recent blaze in this apartment complex, could easily have resulted in even more deaths. "This all happened at 8 p.m. Imagine if it started in the middle of the night with everyone sleeping," Stephanie commented.

The units throughout the apartment building are badly damaged. After two days, the stench of smoke was still overpowering.

Christina and her father, Louis, took turns on the asthma inhaler as they showed the damage. Three of Christina's four windows were broken and boarded,

leaving no access to the fire escape. Glass shards remained on the floor. Her television was busted. Her couch and bed were soaked.

Despite all this, Christina's apartment was deemed livable. New York City Housing and Preservation Department inspectors visited on Saturday but offered no relief, according to Christina's father, Louis. The Red Cross likewise told him it was safe.

Louis said: "The landlord also came by earlier and said, 'I can't put you nowhere, either.' It's unacceptable. My daughter has two kids, one with asthma. How are they going to live here? There's no gas, no heat. It's putting my family at risk. They're saying three to four weeks to get windows in. This is an emergency. A disaster is what it is."

Even before the fire, the list of needed repairs was extensive. "I've lived here two-and-a-half years," Louis told the WSWS. "The stove has never worked. The bathtub is so bad, I could never give her a bubble bath. There's a leak in the ceiling, so when it rains outside it rains inside."

Stephanie, whose apartment is in the same wing of the building where the fire first broke out, explained, "I had a leak in the ceiling. It was moldy and nasty, and nothing happened. It wasn't fixed for five months. My two-year-old daughter has breathing problems."

Now, her apartment is completely trashed. "I'm not living in these conditions," she said. "My bed is broken, all the windows are broken and boarded up, and everything smells like smoke. I'm not sleeping on the floor with my daughter, I won't do it."

Stephanie was struggling Sunday evening to figure out where she and her daughter would live.

For their part, with no money to afford a hotel, Christina and her father were desperately trying to arrange housing for Sunday night. Others in the building, with nowhere else to go, decided to suffer through the acrid stench and dangerous conditions and remain in their apartments.

"We all have to look out for each other," Stephanie said. "The problem is people don't know their rights. We need to stand together. I can't take this anymore. I was always the quiet one, not saying anything. I've had enough.

"I'm a single parent. I bust my ass every day, and I don't have any money to replace anything. This whole time I haven't slept. It's something no one should have

to go through."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact