

Deadly house fires as winter freeze hits Detroit

Our reporting team
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Over the last week two separate house fires in Detroit have left two young children dead and six people injured. Residents in both houses were reportedly using space heaters to fend off freezing cold winter temperatures.

The use of, in many cases, unsafe space heaters is common among families looking to save money on costly energy bills, to warm themselves after a utility shutoff, or in the absence of a working furnace.

The fire Wednesday night on Dwyer Street injured six, including four children. The *Detroit News* reported that the youngest child had been bandaged “from head to toe.”

Three generations of family members were crammed into the small house. The grandmother, Kim Edwards, 40, escaped the fire by jumping out of a window, breaking her leg and back in the process. The children injured in the blaze were aged 1, 3, 7, and 13.

Detroit firefighters told the local CBS news outlet that a broken water main in front of the house hampered their efforts to put out the fire. The main was continuing to flood the street with water on Thursday afternoon when the WSWs team arrived.

The WSWs spoke with Austin, a high school student who lives on the block. “A lot of people I know around here don’t have utilities. I can’t even count how many. People here are trying to survive. This is the gutter.”

Referring to the recent decision by a federal judge to approve the bankruptcy of Detroit, Austin added, “It’s a lie that the city is bankrupt. They just want to make us work more and work harder.”

Iola Norris, a neighbor, told the WSWs that she and her family were asleep when they heard a lot of noise. “I thought it was the kids playing. But then we heard screaming that there was a fire.” She said her nephew, Terry Norris, ran to the house and saw that the family

was trying to get out but couldn’t do so because the doors were locked and windows barred. Iola said Terry got a brick and broke the window, let himself in and rescued the family.

“The daughter was screaming ‘save my kids,’” Iola continued. “The grandmother jumped out of the second floor window and broke her legs. It was terrible.

“There was a little baby in the house. They had old school space heaters. Those will start a fire easily—all it takes is a kid to knock one the wrong way.” Describing the conditions in the area, Iola added, “We are all struggling in this neighborhood. I’m using space heaters because my furnace hasn’t worked in a year. We can’t afford the repairs and to pay utilities too. DTE will shut you off in a minute. They should have more consideration for people who are struggling. And I don’t know what Obama is doing.

“It’s hard for people in this area and they don’t care about us. All they care about is the richer neighborhoods. We are poor people. There’s plenty of services for the rich neighborhoods, but nothing for us down here in the ghetto.”

Chemar Greenfield, 15 years old, said, “I knew one of the children. He played basketball with me and another friend. We are the only kids in the neighborhood. It’s terrible what happened to him.”

A deadly fire also took place on the 16800 block of Prairie Street in Detroit last Friday. Two children, ages 1 and 4, were killed in the blaze.

City authorities and the media have blamed the father for the tragedy because he was not in the house at the time of the fire. He has subsequently been charged with involuntary manslaughter and child abuse, according to *Fox Detroit*.

Witnesses told the WSWs, however, that the father only left for a few minutes to buy cigarettes, never

leaving the block and returning immediately.

The media suggested the blaze was caused by arson, reporting that a witness saw a vehicle drive away after someone threw an object through the window. There has been no confirmation of that story and the fire department, which has fewer than 10 arson inspectors, has not finished its investigation.

While arson cannot be ruled out in a city plagued with many social ills, there is a long history of the authorities criminalizing victims of house fires. In at least two cases—the 1993 Mack Avenue and 2010 Bangor Street fires—authorities sought to jail or strip parents of custody of their children after fatal fires killed a total of ten children. In both cases, the media shouted that the children were left “home alone” in order to cover up the fact that fatal fires were triggered by utility shutoffs in the middle of winter. *Fox 2* reported on Wednesday that investigators have raised the possibility that an “illegal electrical hookup” started the fire. Unauthorized electrical hookups have become widespread because of the catastrophic growth of poverty and large number of families struggling to keep warm. During an investigation, the WSWS showed that utility giant DTE carried out 200,000 utility shutoffs per year in 2010 and 2011.

A local firefighter said two space heaters were found in the Prairie street house. “I bought a space heater myself to save on energy bills, but it’s dangerous. People are asleep—they move the space heater closer. Before you know it the bed catches fire. Space heaters are not supposed to be the main source of heat in a house, but when the power is shut off, they are used that way.”

Everton Marrott, who said he had been friends with the father for some time, told the WSWS, “There’s no reason why those kids should have died. It’s just about survival on this block. We don’t have a chance right now. Over the years, some have gotten so much, while others have gotten nothing. Now, they want to turn the city into farmland. They’re also cutting the pensions of the firefighters. It isn’t right.”

Gloria, also a nearby resident, told the WSWS, “They were a normal family. The father was always driving them to and from school. He was a good guy. I don’t know what started the fire—they’re saying different things. A lot of people have been bringing teddy bears and balloons, it’s a tradition around here.”



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