

SEP vice presidential candidate Niles Niemuth visits scene of fatal fire in Manchester, New Hampshire

John Marion
10 June 2016

At dawn on Monday, a fire in a wood-framed building in Manchester, New Hampshire killed a young family and left 30 other people homeless. Ten-year-old Joshua Harrison II and his eight-year-old stepbrother, Jay Garon, died of smoke inhalation. Their parents, Joshua Harrison and Ailene Moody, were also killed.

The building was at 198 Wilson Street in Manchester's east side, a working class neighborhood not far from downtown. Press reports indicate that, according to Manchester Fire Chief Daniel Goonan, only seven of the 12 apartments had tenants at the time of the fire. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters talked with neighbors who said that the building had been sold to a new landlord recently, but no information on the former or current owner has been released.

Video of the blaze shows how quickly it developed. A neighboring building of similar construction was, fortunately, not touched.

Like many cities along the Merrimack River, Manchester was built around textile mills that used the river for power in the 19th century. The city was named in 1807 by a merchant who thought that, like Manchester, England, it would become a center of the industrial revolution. In the second half of the 20th century, textile manufacturers abandoned Manchester along with the cities of Lowell, Lawrence and Haverhill. Nonetheless, the population of Manchester has grown from slightly less than 88,000 in 1970 to more than 110,000 in 2014.

As of 2014, 14.3 percent of Manchester residents lived below the poverty level. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average hourly wage for fast food cooks is under \$10 per hour, for retail workers between \$12 and \$13 per hour and for social and

human service assistants only slightly more than \$14.

The largest employment sector in Manchester is education and health services, which saw a 5.9 percent increase in jobs between February 2015 and February 2016; trade, transportation and utilities comprise the second largest sector, and increased by 2 percent in the same period. Manufacturing jobs decreased by 3.9 percent in the 12 months ending February 2016. The largest employers are Elliott Hospital (3,375 jobs) and the Catholic Medical Center (2,100). Fairpoint Communications, which collaborated with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to impose a concessions contract on workers after their 2014-2015 strike, employs 1,300 workers in the city.

On June 8, Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Niles Niemuth visited Manchester and its east side. Many workers in the neighborhood are from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Central America. On Wilson Street, Niemuth and a WSWs reporter spoke with Rosemarie and Maria, who live nearby.

Rosemarie, who has four children, recently left a job at McDonald's that was paying less than \$8 per hour. Rents in the old building where she lives, which does not even have washers and dryers, start at \$950 a month.

Ailene Moody, one of those who died in the fire, worked at E & R Dry Cleaners in Manchester. Maria said that workers at E & R are afraid to complain or seek help because of the threat of being fired. "My sister worked there," she said, and "she got fired only because she couldn't go to work when her husband had surgery."

Niemuth asked: “Recently, President Obama has been saying that the economy is great. He’s repeatedly made the remark that ‘things are pretty darn great’ and that people basically need to stop complaining. What is your reaction to a remark like that, given what you see?”

Rosemarie responded, “No, I think the economy is not good. Everywhere you go, prices are very high. I mean, people who don’t get help [food stamps] cannot afford to go to Market Basket and make, you know, nice groceries, they have to go to the dollar store, or go to churches” that run food pantries. Government assistance is not enough to pay for basic necessities that include rent, telephone and medical care.

Rosemarie added that a friend’s four-year-old son, who is autistic, does not get the support he needs at school. Even children without special needs cannot participate in after-school sports programs unless their parents pay registration fees as high as \$300.

Rosemarie said that drugs are often sold in the neighborhood, and the police look the other way. The WSWs reporter stated that drug addiction grows, in part, out of desperate economic conditions. Maria responded that “people, they got a lot of stress, they only look for the easy way: drinking, drugs, selling drugs.”

Niemuth added that “it’s a national issue. You can choose any town in this country, and there are people who are overdosing.”



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