

Housing crisis intensifies in Syracuse, New York

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A fast moving house fire in Syracuse, New York killed six people, including four children, in May, underscoring the housing crisis facing the working class in this upstate New York city and across the country.

The tragedy took place in the early morning hours of May 6, when the home on Martin Street owned by Kevin and Colleen Anderton caught fire. They both survived the fire; Kevin was at work and Colleen escaped from the blaze with injuries. But Kevin's brother Gordon, 34, and his two sons, Jacob, 10, and Lawrence, 12, who were living with them died. Kevin's daughter Cassie, 7, and son Kevin Jr., 13, and William Yager, 33, a cousin, also perished.

The fire rapidly engulfed the home and took fire crews 30 minutes to extinguish. The home was reported not to have had working smoke detectors. After an investigation it is believed that discarded smoking materials may have been the cause.

Many workers in Syracuse have been the victims of similar fires over the past few years.

What most of these families have in common are deplorable and overcrowded housing conditions. It is common that several families have to live together in crowded conditions. In other cases, absentee landlords and investment firms, seeking to make a fast profit, leave the homes without sorely needed repairs.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines residence overcrowding as anything less than 165 square feet per person, or conditions where there are more than two people per bedroom.

The single family three-bedroom home on 212 Martin Street housed eight people and was listed at 1136 square feet of livable area, or just 137.5 square feet per person, falling under the category of overcrowding by

both HUD measures.

President Obama's so-called economic recovery has not made its way to Syracuse, New York or much of upstate New York's cities and towns. The housing crisis in Syracuse is linked to unemployment caused in large part by deindustrialization that feeds the ever-rising poverty rate.

Indices across the board show rising levels of inequality in Syracuse. US Census Bureau statistics for the city list 35.1 percent poverty in 2014, a nearly 13 percent increase over 2010's 31.1 percent rate. Half of all those 18 years of age and under are living in poverty.

The percentage of people able to afford a home is dropping. Since reaching its height in 2005, when nearly 70 percent of families owned homes, today this has fallen to under 64 percent, the same level as in 1995.

As more and more low-income and even middle-income workers are unable to afford buying a home, rents are skyrocketing. Since 2008, the median renting rate has increased over \$200 a month, from just over \$650 a month to over \$850 a month. The monthly rent in Syracuse for a two-bedroom apartment on rentjungle.com averages \$868.

Thousands of families are on the waiting list for public housing, with many people waiting up to three years for a spot. This leaves many families to cope by huddling together to rent or own.

Andrew Cuomo, governor of New York State since 2011 and former secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under the Clinton administration, announced last month with much fanfare new legislation to address the problem of abandoned homes. Cuomo said, "I thank my colleagues in the Assembly and Senate for seeing a crisis and helping to turn it into

an opportunity for people to realize the great American Dream of homeownership.”

But the bill only requires that banks pay small fines if they don’t maintain properties that have fallen vacant or which they’ve taken over. The bill establishes very little in the way of new funding for relief of homeowners.

WSWS reporters went to the Anderton home and spoke with area residents. Many relayed the deep going effect of the sudden tragedy, especially on the classmates of the children who perished.

Erin said, “I was awakened by the brightness of the fire, and we live at least two blocks away. We didn’t know the family personally, but our kids all went to the same school.” She spoke of the generous support from the community for the victims: “Many small businesses have donated services to help the remaining family and there has been a lot of support from just regular people.”

She said of economic conditions in the area, “There have been a lot of companies that have closed down, like Syracuse China and Carrier; it is difficult to find a good job. I love living in Syracuse, but it doesn’t seem to be getting better.” She said that politicians “don’t seem to care about ordinary people. They only listen to those that have the largest wallets.”

The WSWS returned to a home on Richmond Avenue that was the subject of a May 2014 article on local housing conditions in the city. The burned-out four-family house was home to 14 people, who were displaced by the fire. The number of people living in the home places it on the verge of qualifying as being overcrowded. The Richmond Avenue house is still there and in even worse condition than two years ago.

A neighbor adjacent to the burnt abandoned home, who wished to remain anonymous, said of the housing conditions in Syracuse, “If I ever get a chance I will move very far away from here. It’s terrible.” He added, “An investor bought some of the abandoned houses on the street for just what was owed the city in back taxes and tore them down.”

The WSWS also revisited the site of the deadly November 2014 fire on South State Street where three were killed: Margaret Settles, 64, her daughter Santique Settles, 38, and her four-month-old grandson, Marvon Gunn. There were 10 family members living in the four-bedroom home, classifying it as overcrowded according

HUD standards.

The burned-out home is still standing, with the memorial to those who were lost still on the front steps.

WSWS reporters visited the most heavily affected areas of city. Next to Syracuse University is a low-income and senior housing complex, Toomey Abbot Towers, where we spoke with Lenny, a resident. We asked about the conditions and waiting time to obtain an apartment. “For the most part,” he said, “they will get in you pretty quick if you have a disability. The conditions aren’t too bad as far as upkeep of the facility.” He added, “For working people in need it could be months before they get an apartment and they would have to pay much more.”

When we asked about general housing conditions in Syracuse, he responded, “They’re terrible, and many of the places for rent by landlords are not kept up and they are expensive and when you need something fixed it takes forever.”

WSWS reporters also spoke with Tinisha on the Syracuse’s west side, whose own housing situation was fine but related to us, “I’ve lived here my whole life and overall the housing conditions are getting worse. Many of the homes are in bad neighborhoods and are not taken care of by absentee landlords.”

“I have one friend who just moved from a place that had bedbugs,” she said. “The landlord told them it was clean but it wasn’t and she lost almost everything she owned and other personal belongings, like family photos, because of the risk of spreading the bedbugs who lay their eggs in concealed places.

“The landlord blamed her and would not reimburse her for belongings and he even stole her security deposit.” Tinisha agreed that everyone should have the right to decent housing: “There are plenty of vacant houses in the city that could be fixed up for people to live in, but they just let them rot and tear them down instead.”



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