

The Oakland fire tragedy and the housing crisis in America

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The death toll from last Friday's fire at a warehouse in Oakland, California stands at 36, with 85 percent of the burnt-out structure having been searched. Among the dead, some of whom have yet to be identified, are young people and artists who made their home in the 86-year-old sprawling two-story structure known as the Ghost Ship. The building was leased to an artists' collective in the Fruitvale district of the city.

It was the deadliest building fire in the US since a Rhode Island nightclub fire in 2003, which claimed 100 lives. The tragedy has horrified the San Francisco Bay Area and the world, leaving many asking how such an event could take place in 21st century America.

It is unclear at this point whether criminal charges will be filed against the owner of the building, Chor Nar Siu Ng, who owns several other blighted properties in Oakland, or against Derick Ion Almena, who leased the property, lived there with his wife and three children, and ran the artists' collective. Looking for an individual to blame, the media has launched a campaign against Almena in particular, who lost many people he knew in the blaze.

Authorities have pointed to electrical problems and the lack of basic fire safety provisions in the dilapidated structure. At the root of the tragedy, however, lies the dysfunctional character of American capitalism, including a housing crisis born of poverty, social inequality, and years of neglect by government authorities.

The Bay Area, long known as a haven for artists and students, is now largely unaffordable for workers and young people. Along with the tech boom of the last six years, housing prices have skyrocketed. Warehouses and lofts in San Francisco's former industrial areas have given way to high-end condos and workspaces to house tech start-ups and their employees. More than

2,000 people are evicted annually in the city.

This has pushed artists and others struggling to find affordable housing to Oakland, across the San Francisco Bay, and beyond. Now these areas are also increasingly unaffordable, with the median cost of available rentals in Oakland standing at \$3,000 a month, far beyond what is affordable for most Americans. People living in buildings such as the Ghost Ship are faced with the choice of living in substandard housing or being homeless.

Speaking to CBS, a city councilor from Fruitvale estimated that there are some 200 warehouses in Oakland "that have no papers, no permit, no fire code, nothing." If occupied, these structures are disasters waiting to happen. And while building inspectors apparently ignore these deathtraps, no measures are taken to alleviate the growing crisis that leads to their use as housing.

The Bay Area's economy has spawned a small army of billionaires, with 50 of them making it onto the Forbes 400 list of richest Americans in 2016. Oakland itself is increasingly socially polarized, home to the fifth largest cluster of "elite zip codes" in the US, ranked by a combination of high income and education level attained. At the same time, more than 800,000 people in the region live below the poverty line.

The housing crisis in the Bay Area mirrors that of metropolitan areas across the country. The *Los Angeles Times* reports that more than 20,000 rent-controlled apartments in LA have been taken off the market since 2011 to make way for pricey homes and condos for the wealthy, leading to hundreds of evictions this year.

Evictions are taking place not only in thriving real estate markets like San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles, but also in places like Milwaukee and St. Louis, where deindustrialization and unemployment,

combined with wages that do not keep pace with the cost of living, are driving people out of their homes.

According to a report released last year by Harvard University titled “Projecting Trends in Severely Cost-Burdened Renters,” by 2025 nearly 15 million US households will devote more than half of their income to rent. Those unable to keep pace with their rent or mortgage payments will find themselves evicted and possibly homeless.

The federal government has long since abandoned any responsibility for the provision of decent housing, leading to disasters like that in Oakland last week. According to the US Fire Administration, an organization that tracks fire deaths based on media reports, there were 2,290 fire deaths in the US in 2015, many of them in mobile homes or other substandard housing.

The first US national housing legislation, passed in 1937, went beyond providing low-cost public housing and was aimed at improving the lagging economy by funding jobs to build affordable housing. Public housing today has largely ceased to exist, with units sold off to developers to turn a quick profit, and those in need of housing waiting years if not decades for openings to use their Section 8 housing vouchers.

The Obama administration, following the Bush and Clinton administrations before it, has made no pretense of establishing a public works program to address the woeful state of infrastructure in the US—whether in housing, roads, bridges, energy grids or in other vital areas.

President-elect Donald Trump has made clear his attitude toward the housing crisis with his nomination of Ben Carson to run the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Carson, a retired neurosurgeon with no professional housing policy experience, has declared his hostility to the entire concept of public housing and social provision in general, stating: “It really is not compassionate to pat people on the head and say, ‘There you poor little thing, I’m going to take care of all your needs, your health care, your food and your housing, don’t you worry about anything’” (Conservative Political Action Conference, February 26, 2015).

The Socialist Equality Party calls for an immediate halt to foreclosures and evictions and for the provision of billions of dollars to provide decent, low-cost

housing to those in need. Housing is a social right that can be assured only by placing the home construction and financing industry under public ownership.

For tragedies like that in Oakland to be averted in the future, public funds must be poured into the construction of new homes for working families. Such a project can be undertaken only under a workers government based on a socialist program, which treats affordable housing as a basic human right, not a privilege reserved for the wealthy.



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