

# Bay Area workers speak on Oakland Ghost Ship fire

Our reporters

13 December 2016

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed workers and youth who gathered in Oakland to view the site of the December 2 fire at the Ghost Ship artist collective and to mourn those who lost their lives.

About 50 people had gathered to pay their respects to the victims, leaving flowers and candles by the police barricade in front of the converted warehouse where many of the victims lived and worked. Mourners expressed outrage that such a tragedy could occur today in the United States, the wealthiest country in the world.

The warehouse had been occupied by young artists who converted it into a shared workspace and housing complex, and who held concerts there to showcase their talents and to make money to pay their bills.

Unaffordable housing and a negligent inspection regime were the catalysts for the tragedy. The building had never been inspected for fire safety and it lacked any means of escape from a fire. Had it been inspected, the occupants would have likely been evicted and forced into similarly unsafe conditions or into homelessness, rather than have been given the resources to improve safety at the collective or to find conventional housing.

Preventing such tragedies would require the application of resources that are controlled by the wealthiest in society. While thousands in Oakland struggle to make ends meet with the barest necessities, a handful of millionaires and billionaires across the bay in San Francisco live in luxurious mansions.

President-elect Donald Trump has named Ben Carson as his pick for Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Carson, Trump's former challenger in the Republican Party primary, is an opponent of social programs like public housing.

The remarks of those who had gathered at the warehouse uniformly expressed the tragedy of the loss of the 36 people who died in the fire and a sense that it might have been prevented. There was widespread identification of the tragedy with the lack of affordable housing and social inequality.

Michelle, a social worker, said, "It's heartbreaking. It's brought lots of people together from different walks of life. When I moved to the Bay Area 20 years ago, a nice apartment cost only \$500 a month. Housing prices have skyrocketed since then, especially since the tech boom started." Asked what she thought of the elections, she said, "The presidential elections were a disaster. Every figure chosen to be in the Trump administration is horrific."

Angel, a cardiac stenographer, told the WSW, "I think this tragedy has opened a lot of eyes to how the city needs to implement building codes more and make sure that buildings are up to code and that they have enough sprinklers, fire alarms and fire extinguishers. It does no good if you have a code but don't enforce it. It's a shame. It definitely could have been prevented. Hopefully it's not overlooked and the city can learn from it and grow from it."

Raquel is a worker from the nearby city of Hayward. She said the Oakland city government bore the most responsibility for the fire. "It's a huge tragedy. The authorities, the inspectors and city officials didn't take their role seriously when someone made complaints and they didn't do what they're supposed to do as public servants. They don't inspect often enough to ensure that policy is met and that residents have security in their communities. Public trust isn't there anymore toward authorities. They should make sure that all buildings are up to code, and it shouldn't take 36 people dying for that to happen."

When the WSWS asked for Raquel's opinion on the crisis of affordable housing, she said, "We need more public programs to build affordable housing where people can live safely. That type of jobs program would also help the economy while creating more housing for people that is up to code."

Raquel's daughter, Michelle, commented on how unaffordable housing has affected their family. "We've lived in Hayward for 10 years and now we're moving. The cost of housing is just too high and it's not worth it anymore. We have to find somewhere else to go."

Remarking on the outcome of the elections Michelle said, "Trump won't make anything better. He'll probably say something stupid on Twitter and start a war. His administration clearly doesn't represent working people, and I think a lot of the people that voted for him will begin to realize this."

Shawn, from Las Vegas, has recently moved to San Jose. He called the tragedy a "sad, sad day," stating that "this could have been anyone at anytime." He saw the cause of the deaths in the lack of affordable housing and poverty. "I know that housing is pretty steep out here for most people, especially if you don't have the six-figure salary. Nobody looks at poverty. Rich people don't pay attention to ants. Nobody really cares. People with money should help out, or do something differently for people. I wish they would figure something out to lower housing prices, and get housing for people. Especially since it's getting cold outside. Everybody is just trying to find somewhere to live, just that one place for them to lay their head. You don't really think about if there are a few fire exits, or if there are sprinklers. You don't really think about those things when you're just trying to make a living and get by and have a place to stay."

John told WSWS reporters that "it [the cost of housing] is completely out of control. I mean, the income disparities between people who are just struggling to survive and people who are making a killing; it is just completely changing the demographics of entire cities." He identified a lack of opportunity for artists, saying, "It is part of a long pattern of artists being forced to the absolute margins of society and not having the resources to live in a humane and safe way. Our society isn't set up to provide that for artists or to provide for them to have gainful employment. So they have to resort to extreme and very, very compromised

conditions to pursue their vocation, and this is what can result from that." The ultimate responsibility of the Ghost Ship tragedy, he said, "rests on many, many, many shoulders."

"There's the greater economic and social-political reasons why creative people are driven into these housing situations," John explained. "Then there's also the more immediate ones of the landlord, the subtenant and the Oakland building inspectors. I wish I knew how it could be prevented, I don't know the answer to that, if there is an answer."

He also expressed his thoughts on the presidential election, stating, "It was just such an incredible wake-up call. I think that a lot of the people who voted for Trump were not bigots, that's not the reason. Somehow he made them feel like someone understood them, someone with power understood them. They imagined that he would do something. I think if someone from the opposite end of the political spectrum connected with those same people, they would get their votes."

John saw Trump's selection of Ben Carson to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development as part of a broader attack on social services. "That's in line with Trump's appointments in general," he said. "He's an anti-government person. He will generally appoint someone to head an agency who has taken a position of wanting to destroy and eliminate that agency. He will put them in charge of that agency."



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**