

Deadly Bronx fire: A tragic product of inequality and social crisis in America

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The tragic loss of life in the December 28 apartment building fire in the New York City borough of the Bronx, with 12 dead and 4 others critically injured, is the worst such toll since the 1990 fire at the Happy Land social club only a short distance away. It surpasses the horrific fire in March 2007, also in the Bronx, which killed 10 people, nine of them children.

This latest fire highlights the deepening social crisis in the wealthiest city on the planet. The fire, at 2363 Prospect Avenue, about one block from the Bronx Zoo, was first reported at 6:50 PM on Thursday, as some residents were still returning home from work. Within minutes, fueled by the cold and gusty winds, it turned the five-story building into an inferno, sending frightened residents into the street in the freezing weather. Deaths were recorded on every floor, the victims ranging in age from 1 year old to over 60. Three young girls died, and three women, ages 19, 27 and 63. Four people were reported on Friday to be fighting for their lives.

One young mother escaped with one of her own children as well as two children of her neighbors, but lost her other children. A resident went out to the corner store for 20 minutes and returned to find the building in flames, his roommate trapped and killed by the smoke and fire.

The blaze was started, according to New York City Fire Department investigators, by a 3-year-old child playing with a stove in a first-floor apartment. One hundred and sixty firefighters responded to the fire within three minutes, but their efforts were hampered by the cold and the extremely rapid spread of the flames.

Survivors and other eyewitnesses reported more than 20 people on the building's fire escape, frantically trying to make it down to safety even as the fire department arrived. Most had no time to put outer clothing on and shivered in the 12 degree Fahrenheit temperature, more than 15 degrees below normal for New York at this time of the year. The fire escape was so packed it had the effect of trapping others in their apartments, where they perished from the fire or from smoke inhalation.

The apartment building is just over a century old, its

construction dating to 1916. According to public records, the building was sold by the city in December 1983 for about \$31,000 after having been seized for nonpayment of back taxes. The brick building was not equipped with sprinklers and had been reported for several safety and building violations in recent years. The only open violation, one which may have played a role in the fire, was for a defective smoke detector and carbon monoxide monitor on the first floor.

There are thousands of such buildings, by no means classified as slums, in New York City today. They lack the basic protections against fire, including sprinkler systems, that are included in the homes of the upper-middle class and the wealthy. The median household income in the Bronx, the city's poorest borough, is \$38,900. This figure, after taxes, would not cover just the rent alone, not to mention other necessities, for more than a few months in the luxury towers now sprouting up in Manhattan, only a few miles away from Prospect Avenue. As far as prices for cooperative apartments in the city's wealthy center go, even \$1 million apartments of two or three bedrooms are hard to come by, and every week brings news of one or more sales for \$10 million or more.

The residents affected by the fire in the Bronx were mostly a cross-section of the immigrant working class, newcomers from West Africa, the West Indies and Latin America. Immigrants make up more than one-third of New York's current population and have helped swell the city's total to a record 8.5 million. The latest figure for the city as a whole is 37 percent foreign-born. The percentage is undoubtedly higher in the city's outer boroughs and is overwhelmingly working class.

Fire Commissioner Daniel Nigro, after expressing grief at the loss of life, focused attention on a door left open by the mother escaping the fire in the first-floor apartment. This, Nigro explained, helped to turn the stairwell "into a chimney," funneling the smoke and flames to the upper floors.

This may well be the case, but this calamity was not

simply a horrible accident caused by carelessness, or, as suggested by the report of the three-year-old playing with the stove, parental irresponsibility.

Such tragedies rarely if ever take place in wealthy neighborhoods, where families are not crowded into old buildings that are unequipped with the latest in life-saving apparatus, and do not face as many stresses of family life that can lead to a child being unattended in a kitchen for a few brief minutes.

The site of the Bronx fire is the northern tip of the 15th Congressional District in New York State. With nearly 750,000 inhabitants, this district comprises the whole of the south Bronx. It is the poorest Congressional District in the entire country, with an official poverty rate of 41.0 percent.

After a long period of population loss, the Bronx has gained residents over the last two decades, but low-wage jobs predominate, where they are available, and public services have lagged behind.

The city as a whole, and particularly the heavily working class outer boroughs, faces scandalously inadequate transportation, forcing workers to commute hours to their jobs. It is not pure coincidence that each of the last three fire disasters—in 1990, 2007 and 2017—has taken place in the city’s poorest borough. Today the homeless shelter population continues to set new records and affordable housing is unavailable for millions. This is the setting for the latest fire tragedy.

The record cold weather is bringing with it an increased number of deadly house fires across the US. In New York City over just the last several days—in Harlem, the upper Manhattan area near Van Cortlandt Park, and the West Farms neighborhood in the Bronx—three other major fires, while not resulting in deaths or life-threatening injuries, required up to 100 firefighters to subdue and led to homelessness for dozens of families.

These events lay bare the social reality in the US. While the corporate and political establishment, basking in Manhattan’s gleaming wealth, smugly declares that New York City is a virtual paradise, the vast majority face a very different reality. In every sphere of life, from jobs to housing, health care, education and transportation—even before the latest and biggest speculative financial bubble bursts—New York remains what newly-reelected Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio hypocritically promised to change four years ago: two worlds in one city.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several survivors and neighbors of the fire tragedy victims. Nana, a 52-year-old home health aide originally from Ghana, was returning to check on his apartment. He had rescued his wife and family the night before. He has lived in the Bronx for eight years. “As soon as I opened my apartment door,” he said, “I

saw nothing but a big cloud of smoke. So then I went and opened up the fire escape to take my wife and children out. I have four children. They are 9, 7, 5 and 3 years old. I live on the third floor of the building, and when I went out on the fire escape the firefighters were already there with a ladder that reached up to the 3rd floor. I handed my children one by one to the firefighters who took them down the ladder and to safety. There were no smoke detectors on the first floor or any floor of the building.”

Marisol Santana is disabled and lives in a shelter across the street from the fire. “I got back here at 6:30 pm,” she explained. “I just smelled gas. Then we looked out and the fire was going. It is tragic what has happened, especially during the holidays. It is very sad. I didn’t know any of the people who were killed personally, but they were families and kids.”

Andrea Catano has been living at 2373 Prospect for 15 years. She had just come from visiting her friend, who had lived on the third floor of the building before her escape from the fire. “They have been looking for people,” she said. “One of the people they are looking for is Emanuel Mensah. He lived on the third floor, and he is Jamaican. He is on leave from the army, and he is 26 years old. His family is looking for him. His dad came here to look for him and so did his sister. She was desperate with worry over what happened to him and wanted the search to continue. They are looking for him in the hospitals and in the building.

“I have been here a long time and I know everyone in the building by face but not by name. Even the kids. They were four kids in the same family who were killed. Some people say it was caused by children playing with a flame on the stove on the first floor. When the mother saw the flames she just grabbed the kids and ran out. Maybe the stove was on because the apartment was cold. That happens.”



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