

Second Bronx fire in less than a week injures 23

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On Tuesday morning, less than a week after a residential fire in the New York City borough of the Bronx killed 12 and injured many more, another fire less than two miles away injured 23, including nine children and left 60 residents displaced. Four were reported to have serious, possibly life-threatening injuries.

The four-story brick building with 12 apartments is located on Commonwealth Avenue, near the Bronx Zoo. Preliminary reports indicate that the fire began in a ground-floor furniture shop, though the specific cause has not yet been determined.

Barely clothed residents were forced to flee onto the frigid street, where the temperature had dropped to 10 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 12 Celsius), part of a week-long stretch of extremely cold weather.

The fire spread rapidly, allowing only minutes for residents to escape the flames. One resident described how her access to a fire escape was prevented by a window guard which she was unable to open or break down.

Approximately 200 firefighters and three dozen pieces of equipment arrived on the scene at 5:30 a.m., within minutes of the emergency call. As with last week's fire, responders were hampered by the sub-freezing temperatures; it took more than five hours to extinguish the massive blaze.

In the aftermath of the earlier fire, authorities were quick to blame a three-year-old child who allegedly was playing with burners on a kitchen stove for starting the inferno and his mother for not closing the apartment door as they fled.

New York's mayor, Democrat Bill de Blasio, sought to deflect any thought that the city's notoriously deteriorated housing conditions for the working class had anything to do with the fire. He told WNYC, the

local public radio station, "there was nothing problematic about the building that contributed to this tragedy."

These attempts to blame the victims seek to obscure the root causes of these fires—the severe shortage of affordable housing, forcing working class families to accept substandard conditions while paying ever-rising rents, and the criminal lack of the most basic fire prevention upgrades, especially in older working-class-occupied buildings. As the city's elite drive housing prices ever higher, the rest of the population is driven to more marginal and poorer quality housing.

Sprinkler systems, smoke detectors, and steel apartment outer doors that close automatically, for example, would likely have greatly attenuated the severity of both fires. However, landlords refuse to make the necessary investments in order to maximize their return and the city's enforcement of existing regulations is criminally lax.

City housing authority records indicate that the building which was the site of last week's fire had a report of defective smoke and carbon monoxide detectors lodged several months ago, but no indication that the problem had been corrected.

A local resident, Candido Lantigua, told the *Guardian*, "They don't change nothing. The buildings aren't safe. They're more than 100 years old."

Many of the victims of these two fires, and others that will inevitably follow, have lost all their possessions and will likely join the more than 60,000 city residents already homeless.



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