

US house fires kill 320 since Christmas, up 50 percent from last year

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Once again, the house fire crisis lays bare the unequal conditions that the working class faces under the bankrupt capitalist system—housing conditions are among the living standards under unrelenting attack.

Due to intense cold and reliance on supplemental heating sources, wood stoves and space heaters, this winter has seen a 55 percent increase in the total number of deaths attributable to residential fires. The lives of 320 people have been taken since December 25, 2017. Over the same period in the previous year, there were already a staggering 207 fatalities. There were 2295 fire-related fatalities for all of 2017.

Of the 320, New York state leads the nation in fire deaths, with 29 killed—the majority perishing in multiple-fatality fires in the New York City boroughs of the Bronx and Brooklyn. The states with the next highest numbers were Pennsylvania and Oklahoma, with 21 and 20 respectively.

The areas most impacted by these fires are working class neighborhoods, where people are struggling to make ends meet and to find affordable, safe housing, under conditions of poorly enforced housing safety regulations.

The Bronx building where fire took 12 lives just after Christmas had been cited for safety code violations. It is reminiscent of the conditions prevalent for workers over 100 years ago in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in lower Manhattan. The families of the Bronx fire victims have filed suit against New York City for not maintaining fire hydrants, allowing them to freeze. Firefighters were forced to scramble in search of unfrozen hydrants, losing valuable time.

The US Census Bureau places the poverty rate for the Bronx at 30.4 percent during 2016, and for those 18 and under at 42.8 percent. In the neighborhood of the recent Bronx fire, the rate was even worse, with 37.5

percent overall and 49.4 percent for 18 and under.

The rise of part-time jobs puts paid to the myth of a widespread economic recovery that was supposedly initiated under the Obama administration. The intervening period has only seen a vast increase in part-time, poverty-level jobs, which have contributed to the gains of Wall Street and the oligarchs.

Here are a few examples from around the country:

Syracuse, New York: a fire broke out at 5:32 a.m. on Tuesday morning in an older, two-family apartment building. Two people were injured and two families left homeless. The cause is officially unknown, but is likely to have been related to a supplemental heating source being used by families struggling to keep their substandard homes above freezing during the outbreak of arctic cold weather. The Census Bureau states that the 2016 poverty rate for the 13204 zip code, where the fire took place, was 36.4 percent overall and 52.9 percent for young people 18 and under.

The WSWS spoke with residents of Syracuse's Erie Street neighborhood who said that the area has seen an increase in absentee landlords who have allowed homes to deteriorate. Bobbi, a 23-year-old hotel worker originally from New York City, who moved to the area three years ago, said, "I've found work and was told it was going to be full-time but that hasn't happened."

Bobbi agreed with WSWS reporters when they stated that it was very difficult for anyone to attend school or start a family on the pay from part-time work without benefits. Asked if she would like to go to school, Bobbi replied, "Yes I would, and I have an interest in the arts but can't afford it."

This same day that the WSWS was on the scene of the Erie Street fire, another fire broke out at a two-family dwelling at 317-319 Marguerite Avenue, also in Syracuse. WSWS reporters rushed over to the scene

and spoke with Syracuse Fire Department personnel, who said the cause was still under investigation. The WSWs spoke with relatives of Lovashia Bush, the tenant of the flat upstairs, who said the fire had started downstairs, and everyone was safely out. The relative also stated that Lovashia and her children would be staying at a local hotel for the time being. This area of Syracuse has only a slightly less dire poverty rate than Erie Street, according to the Census Bureau.

Commodore, Pennsylvania: January 7, an early Sunday morning mobile home fire killed an adult and child. No other information has been made available.

Huffman, Texas , near Houston: Natalie Tienda 33, and two of her children, Kienna, 11, and Tristan, 9, perished when their mobile home caught fire at 5:30 a.m. this past Wednesday. According to reports, the father, David Tienda, was awakened by cries of “fire!” from his children. He was badly burned while trying to save his family, and was hospitalized. It was reported that space heaters were found in the home.

Natalie’s sister, Melissa Gonzalez, spoke to local media: “They were just trying to stay warm. It’s a shame that that happened. They were just trying to stay warm.”

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[30 December 2017]

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[21 January 2017]

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