

Eight children killed in house fire on Chicago's West Side

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Eight children, including one infant, were killed in an apartment fire in the Little Village neighborhood on Chicago's west side early Sunday morning. Fire officials have determined that it started on a second-floor enclosed porch and spread to two greystone buildings and a brown brick cottage behind the buildings around 4:00 a.m., on the 2200 block of S. Sacramento Avenue.

The children killed were identified as Maya Almaraz, 3 months; Ariel Garcia, 5; Lonni Ayala, 3; Gialanni Ayala, 5; Giovanni Ayala, 10; Xavier Contreras, 11; Nathan Contreras, 13; and Victor Mendoza, 16 years old. Two 14-year-old boys were taken to the hospital in very critical condition for smoke inhalation. On Sunday afternoon they were reported to be on life support. A Chicago firefighter has also been hospitalized for overexertion.

The neighborhood is home to a predominantly working class and Latin American immigrant population. Much of the housing stock in the neighborhood is aging, with some buildings being over a century old. Decades of deindustrialization on Chicago's West Side and cuts to public infrastructure and education have led to the growth of unemployment, particularly among youth, higher rates of crime, and a growth in low-wage, precarious employment.

Chicago Fire Commissioner Jose Santiago told local news station CBS 2 that the number of fatalities and injuries caused by the fire in one location "was very unusual" and that the city "had not seen something like this in many years." The *Chicago Tribune* reported that it was the city's deadliest fire in more than a decade.

An intense and emotional scene unfolded on the block following the fire. A woman cried outside on a doorstep with children gathered around her. Chicago police and local television news stations, including

ABC 7 and Telemundo, blocked the entrance to the street. Red crime scene tape cordoned off the entryways from the sidewalk to apartment buildings on the block. Volunteers from the Red Cross roamed up and down the sidewalks to offer water, snacks and emotional support to residents who had gathered outside.

Workers came from the neighborhood and surrounding areas to show support for the families of the victims and to grieve. A small memorial was set up for the victims on a patch of lawn in front of the homes, with candles and white crosses bearing the names of those killed.

"What happened this morning was a massacre," John, a resident on the block, told the World Socialist Web Site. "I saw five bodies wrapped in sheets lined up on the pavement after the firefighters came. Some of them were just babies. Everyone around here is in a state of shock. Children saw this happen. No one here is going to be the same again."

"The building owners were out here in the morning, and all they could say was that they were so angry that the firefighters broke the windows of their property so they could get the people inside. But you know, windows can be replaced. You cannot replace a life."

"Even though I did not know the families of the children who died, deep inside I feel connected to them. I am the father of twin babies, and they were all I could think about through this whole thing. I'm very emotional right now. Look all around, there is so much emotion here."

John told the WSWs that he works two jobs, one of them as a pizza delivery driver. "People around here work more jobs than that. You don't really know what it's like until you spend a day here."

"I did not hear any smoke alarms. It took probably 30 minutes for the fire department to get here. If this

happened in a rich neighborhood like Gold Coast there would have been firefighters there right away and everyone would have been saved. But the rich don't care about this place; it has been neglected and abused for a long time."

While the exact causes of the fire remain unknown at the time of this writing, the Chicago Department of Buildings records show that the building failed an inspection in June due to an electrical problem.

Chicago Fire Department spokesman Larry Merritt said that investigators found no working smoke detectors in the building. Residents were alerted to the fire by a neighbor who told local press that she had been watching television when she saw flames through the window and told her neighbors in the house to get out.

The results of the investigation so far point to the fact that the tragic deaths were entirely preventable. According to the fire department, if working smoke detectors had been in place, the victims would have been woken by the alarms and could have all escaped to safety.

Robert, who works for a service company which boards up buildings after fire damage, said that fires in Chicago and its suburbs are fairly common. "In a regular week, we'll have like four or five fires that we respond to. Sometimes as much as four per day."

"I've heard that the fire here was intentional, and then I've heard that it wasn't intentional. We don't know the cause of the fire until after the investigation is done. What I had originally heard was that this was an electrical fire."

"I don't even know if there were fire alarms in there. In Chicago, it all depends on your landlord and how well they maintain the property."

These same words could be used to describe the situations of workers across the US and around the world. Forced to live in substandard conditions due to falling wages and a rising share of wealth going to the top, many workers find themselves with no choice but to live in the most inexpensive areas that they can find. These are often areas with few amenities and social services, decaying infrastructure, and higher rates of crime.

According to the US Fire Association, 114 home fire deaths were recorded in the state of Illinois in 2017, a rate of 9.5 per month, with 18 in the city of Chicago. So

far, 2018 has seen 78 recorded home fire deaths in the state, a rate of 9.75 per month.

Chicago Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel delivered empty remarks about the tragedy in Little Village at an unrelated event on Sunday. "There's a horrific loss of life. We haven't seen this in a long time in the city of Chicago." In 2012, Emanuel announced cuts to funding and staffing for the Chicago Fire Department, referring to the plan as "reform."

George Cardenas, Democratic Alderman for the 12th District of the city, visited the scene Sunday morning and told the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "It's a massive tragedy, especially in a neighborhood that struggles." Cardenas made no effort to mention the decades of budget cuts and deindustrialization efforts overseen by the Democratic Party.

Workers and youth in Chicago will not find a way forward against poverty and cuts to social services through the Democratic Party apparatus and its many middle-class activist organizations throughout the city. In order to wage a fight for its demands for the funding of jobs programs, decent housing, and social and public infrastructure, the working class must build its own neighborhood committees, led by workers themselves.

The wealth of the capitalist class, created by the labor of the working class, must be expropriated by the workers in order to pay for the needs of the working class through a coordinated struggle worldwide to overthrow the capitalist system and replace it with socialism.



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