

A tragedy born of inequality: Ten children die in Chicago house fire

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There are tragedies that reveal the reality of social life for the entire world to see. The horrific fire that tore through a Chicago home on Sunday, killing 10 children aged three months to sixteen years, is one such event.

Two children have now died in hospital of injuries sustained in the fire. Eight others were killed immediately when the house in which they were staying, on Sacramento Avenue in the Little Village neighborhood of Chicago, went up in flames.

The children have been identified as Maya Almaraz, 3 months; Lonni Ayala, 3 years; Ariel Garcia, 5; Gialanni Ayala, 5; Giovanni Ayala, 10; Xavier Contreras, 11; Nathan Contreras, 13; Adrian Hernandez, 14; Cesar Contreras, 15; and Victor Mendoza, 16. The children came from several families, two of which were related.

The fire has devastated the predominantly working poor and immigrant neighborhood of Little Village, known as “La Villita.” The blaze and its agonizing aftermath have reverberated across Chicago as an expression of the human cost of endemic poverty and social inequality in America.

While the cause of the fire remains under investigation, it is known that the home did not have working smoke detectors, which could have prevented the loss of life. “It was not hard to get out,” fire official Larry Langford said. “The fire started in the rear, and the entryway to the front was wide open. Had they been awake, or if someone had woken them, they would have gotten out.”

John, a resident of the block, spoke to the World Socialist Web Site on Sunday at the scene of the fire. He said: “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 the 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.”

The building where the fire started is over 100 years old. The property has a history of tenant complaints and city building code violations, failing four of seven inspections in the last three years. City records indicate that violations have ranged from vermin to extreme neglect and disrepair. The most recent citations included dangerous electrical problems.

Little Village is home to generations of immigrant families, mostly the working poor. The neighborhood has a median annual household income of about \$35,000. A third of the residents live below the official poverty line.

As reports of code violations and neglect emerged in the days following the fire, officials tried to cast blame on the families. Twelfth Ward Alderman George Cardenas, head of the Chicago City Council’s Latino Caucus and close supporter of Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, told the local ABC News outlet: “Leaving an infant, three months old, in the hands of a sixteen-year old... What were they thinking?”

On Monday evening Alissandra Calderon, a spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, confirmed that the agency was investigating allegations of child neglect.

Earlier on Monday, Cardenas offered apologies for landlords in an interview with the *Sun-Times*. He explained that to fix certain problems in a building, “[Y]ou have to evict people. The owner is looking for time to improve. He’s got to have a chance to correct those violations.”

Such is the social chasm that divides the Democratic Party from the working class!

Responsibility for this tragedy lies squarely with the

ruling class and its political representatives. Chicago is controlled by the Democrats. It is the political home of Barack Obama and has been run for years by Mayor Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff and a multi-millionaire former investment banker.

The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, have overseen the extreme growth of social inequality that has left housing and basic infrastructure to rot while the wealth of the city's elite ballooned. The Democrats have nominated for Illinois governor a billionaire heir to the Hyatt Hotel fortune, J.B. Pritzker, a major fundraiser for Obama. In November, Pritzker will face off against Republican Bruce Rauner, himself a former hedge fund manager.

Now in his second term, Emanuel is personally identified with ruthless pro-business policies, in particular the closure of 50 elementary schools and layoff of thousands of teachers. But the destruction of public education is just one aspect of the attack on the working class.

The supply of safe, affordable housing in Chicago has been throttled by city leaders, contributing to the growing number of families forced to turn to dangerous, ill-maintained buildings. Last year, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was discovered to have played a critical role in limiting the number of affordable housing units. For years, CHA denied rent vouchers to qualifying households, despite having received federal funds for that purpose. Between 2007 and 2012, years of great need after the 2008 mortgage crisis, the CHA wait list soared to more than 91,000 households.

The social landscape of Chicago is aptly described by Andrew Diamond in his 2017 book, *City on the Make*. He characterizes Chicago as "a combination of Manhattan smashed against Detroit." Chicago, home to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and Board of Trade as well as numerous investment and banking firms, combines aspects of a major financial center like New York with those of a rustbelt city that has suffered the ravages of deindustrialization such as Detroit. Both cities exemplify the extreme growth of social inequality that has been the dominant feature of American society over the past several decades.

The hundreds of thousands of jobs that once existed in manufacture—automotive, steel, meatpacking—have been replaced, if they have been replaced at all, by low-

wage and part-time positions in the service and logistics sectors. Concentrated toward the city center are wealthy and upper-middle class neighborhoods. Stretching out into the further reaches are lower-middle class, working class and impoverished neighborhoods, with working and poor households increasingly pushed into the suburbs and surrounding counties.

Working class areas are starved of funds while limitless resources are made available for vanity projects like the Obama Presidential Center in the South Side, currently estimated to cost about \$500 million, \$175 million of which is expected to come from public sources.

Conditions in the city of Chicago express the character of social relations throughout the United States—a society dominated by a corporate and financial oligarchy that controls both political parties and has accumulated unimaginable sums through the exploitation and impoverishment of the vast majority, a society in which the most basic requirements of modern life, such as safe housing and working smoke detectors, are sacrificed at the altar of profit, with all of the predictably horrific consequences. The needless death of ten children in a fire resulting from poverty and official neglect is the ugly face of American capitalism.



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