

“The politicians want to sweep this under the rug”

Hundreds gather to commemorate ten children killed in Chicago house fire

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Family, friends, neighbors and even strangers attended a vigil yesterday to mourn and commemorate the lives of ten children who died in a horrific house fire early Sunday morning in Chicago’s working class Little Village neighborhood.

The ten children, whose ages ranged from 5 months to 16 years old, were having a sleepover when a fire sparked in the back of their building quickly spread as they slept. The fire killed eight immediately, with two more dying from fire injuries in the hospital. The cause of the fire has yet to be determined.

The vigil was a powerful display of solidarity by the working class residents of Little Village. Balloons, candy, posters, candles and hand-written notes, along with photos of the children who perished, ornamented the sidewalk in front of the building of the fire. Family members provided food as guests gave their condolences and stayed throughout the evening to comfort the family of the lost children.

The horrific fire is one of the worst tragedies in Chicago’s history. But the vigil has been virtually ignored by the city’s Democratic Party leadership. No one from Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s office or the office of Alderman George Cardenas of the 12th Ward, in which Little Village resides, attended.

In an attempt to absolve himself of responsibility, Emanuel said yesterday, “I want to know how it got started. Why it happened. ... When the investigation is done, we’re gonna know more before you start pointing fingers of who’s to blame.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote yesterday, “Responsibility for this tragedy lies squarely with the ruling class and its political representatives.” For decades, the Democratic Party has led the savage

attacks against the working class through school closures, the gutting of good paying jobs and the erosion of affordable, safe and decent housing. They must be held accountable for creating the conditions which led to the Little Village house fire.

WSWS reporters spoke to family members of the children that died as well as workers who came to mourn the horrific tragedy. There was an outpouring of grief as well as anger at the political establishment.

Gerardo, grandfather to some of the children who died, was emotional as he spoke about his loss. “Three grandchildren of mine have gone. How do you think I should feel? There’s no way to express how I feel. I wake up in the middle of the night, I hardly sleep, I have been having nightmares that I am playing with my grandkids, and I wake up in the middle of the night. That’s never going to go away. I need to make myself strong for my daughter, Priscilla. She can’t talk about her loss.

“The children came over for a sleepover. They were having a pajama party and they went to sleep. The fire didn’t start when they had a pajama party. The landlord didn’t have any fire alarms. He also had some violations with the electricity. We don’t know the full truth here.”

While the media and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has been quick to blame the mother and the family, Gerardo countered, “It’s not the fault of the family. Working class families like us need safe housing. We can’t afford to live in a city like Chicago. These people that have all this wealth, we should use their money to help poor people. It’s not happening though.

“The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting

poorer, and they blame *everything* on us! This mayor closed 50 schools. I will never vote for him. And his police kill people. And then look at our moron president... That's the state of the world."

Gregorio, a friend of Gerardo added, "I feel so bad for what happened. The children were four, six and ten years old. I knew them through Gerardo. The condition of the houses here for working class families are not built for safety. They don't care.

"If it's in the rich parts of the city or the suburbs, they will do anything for safety. If you don't provide fire extinguishers and fire detectors, children will die sleeping like this. The politicians only go for money, not for safety. We need people that take care of the poor people like us. We do the work. We have to eat and pay the rent."

Enrique, a friend of the family and a community organizer, spoke out against the attempt by the media to blame the victims. "This was a modern day, low income working class family," he noted. "DCFS has been blaming the family and reporting on the mother's prior violations. How many violations does this system have? What about the smoke detectors? Why not provide the family with the resources instead of shunning them? This is a problem with the system itself. If a family doesn't have a job, help them get a job. We don't get those resources here.

"The mayor and the aldermen didn't come here. They declined our invitations. They want to sweep this under the rug. The landlord had so many violations. And the house next door had an explosion last year. They are playing games with the ten kids' lives, and the politicians want to commit a blasphemy by blaming the mother!

"These kinds of circumstances will continue to happen in our neighborhoods. Our parks don't have water because they are contaminated with lead. Where is the city to help us? Ten kids from the community died. It's a massive tragedy. The working class has come here to support us. Not the politicians.

"Yolanda is doing her best to stay strong. She lost five children, her babies. It's amazing the media is not investigating how the system and the city failed this family."

Elsa, a city worker who lives nearby in Little Village came to show her support and spoke out against the terrible housing conditions for the working class. "The

landlords don't put smoke detectors in many apartments. My daughter with four kids lives in an apartment where he doesn't put any smoke detectors in there. Her porch is almost caving in. Anything could happen to them too just like it happened here. These landlords should be given violations and fines. They charge rents from \$1,000 to \$2,000, and they have rats in the houses. People are struggling to pay rent here.

"The politicians and the wealthy neglect us. We have no good housing in Little Village. I see the conditions in different neighborhoods. For single mothers in particular, there are no good options. The alderman and the politicians who are blaming the families are totally wrong. They don't represent the working class — they represent the rich! They have their hands in the cookie jar.

"Construction is happening for the upper class in the rich north neighborhoods and downtown. There's nothing new happening for our neighborhoods. And they take TIF [tax increment financing] money for places like Englewood and put it for rich neighborhoods. They say there's no money. We generate the money! Some of the families working for the city pay \$1,200 month for health insurance. They make all the profits while we are all struggling for everything. We need a movement to fight for jobs, housing, healthcare and everything. This is a crooked city. Alderman Solis in Pilsen sold out. The politicians are liars and we do all the hard work. We are treated wrong and it shouldn't happen. We need to rise up and speak up for our rights."



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