

“This is a class issue, and it’s a social issue”

Memorial service held for six of ten children killed in Chicago Little Village house fire

Our reporters
3 September 2018

In the shape of a crescent moon, the bodies of six of the ten children killed in the August 26 Chicago house fire lay in white caskets at the center of Our Lady of Tepeyac church in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood Saturday morning. The church held a memorial service for the six children, two blocks from the site of the fire.

Approximately 200 people attended, with many traveling long distances from throughout Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. Funerals for the four remaining children will take place this week.

The names of the six victims—3-month-old Amayah Almaraz, 5-year-old Ariel Garcia, 11-year-old Xavier Contreras, 13-year-old Nathan Contreras, 14-year-old Cesar Contreras, and 14-year-old Adrian Hernandez—were airbrushed onto T-shirts and worn by family members and friends to commemorate their lives.

There were moments of a celebratory mood. Family and friends stood and sat in front of the church, exchanging personal memories and stories about the children, laughing as children ate candy and playfully chased other.

This was periodically contrasted sharply by a sudden silence and a look upon family members and friends of deep shock, sadness and yearning to understand how this horror could have happened.

On Sunday August 26, the 10 children, ages 3 months to 16 years old, were having a sleepover in the back coach house of an apartment in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood when a fire broke out in the early morning. Eight children died inside while two more would die days later at John H. Stroger Jr. Hospital from their sustained fire injuries. The children were

alone and without their parents at the time of the fire.

Amongst the friends and family at the ceremony was Henry, who wore a shirt with the airbrushed names of the children. At the time of the fire, he and his partner Vince were sleeping in the front garden unit of the building where the children died.

“When the fire started we were asleep. Someone came banging on our window, screaming, ‘The building in back is on fire!’ I got out of my apartment and turned to look up to see a huge flame. I didn’t know who was there at the time, but I thought, ‘Nobody’s coming out of there alive.’

“There was a woman knocking on neighbors’ doors, telling them to get out, and a man from the first floor doing the same, so that is how people were being warned. Then I heard the fire department coming. I got out of the apartment with my dogs and when we came to the corner, I could see the flame and watched it as it spread across our building to the building next door.

“Ash was raining down on us as it spread from one building to the next, so we left and headed to the corner across the street. Our apartment is in the garden unit. It’s made of stone, so it did not even get any smoke damage.”

When WSWs reporters asked if the fire could have been prevented, Henry stated:

“I believe that if the landlord was able to sell his building, and the city could have made a little money here and there and had done some inspections to make a couple of bucks, I think those problems would have been fixed overnight. But there was no motivation.

“I can count four inspectors who came through there, and I’ve lived there for five years. I’ve lost a television, a microwave, and a refrigerator, all because

of electrical problems. Merced, the owner, was there during the inspections.”

Henry was suspicious of official reports that electrical problems were ruled out as a cause of the fire. “I believe the city will do whatever it can to cover its ass. The last time inspectors came through, they had squad cars with them. They were protected, so you know that they knew what they were walking into.”

Henry recalled that after the inspectors left and the electricity was supposedly fixed, he turned on the hot water to bathe and felt shocks run through both of his hands. “The owner did not want me to tell anyone about this. I sent an email to the city about this, I believe it was on [July] 27th. The city has known about this.

“I used to be in real estate. I understand what is happening in this city. Obama [who had ties to Tony Rezko, one of the most notorious slum landlords in the city] put [Chicago Mayor] Rahm [Emanuel] into power. I understand that whole financial collapse in 2008, and no one went to jail for that.

“When [Little Village Democratic] Alderman George Cardenas says that the owner needs time to fix the problems, that’s ludicrous. This man has had plenty of time. He is 91 years old, how much time does he have left?

“This happened because the people here are poor, and the city doesn’t care about them. Just look at how the buses run around here. Life is hard here. I have come to know the people here and all of my neighbors have been very good to me. If the media says that they are bad people, it’s all lies.”

Henry grew up in Little Village and recalled from his experiences how social dynamics in the area had changed. “When I was growing up, the neighborhood was mostly Bohemian. My parents owned a bakery on 26th Street. You can’t open a business around here anymore without shutting it down after a couple of years.

“I used to go swimming at the YMCA over by Sacramento Boulevard, but I don’t see anyone go there anymore. Everyone I knew had a car when they turned 16. Now you can’t have a car here, or the city tickets you. The other thing that has changed is that there is no money.

“I know that Michigan Avenue is the busiest shopping district in the city. Right over here on 26th

Street is the second busiest. Close by on Marshall Boulevard, the city spent a lot of money putting in a new bike path. But it wasn’t meant for the people who live here. What I want to know is, why are the people who live here so poor when the area is surrounded by money?

“This is a class issue, and it’s a social issue. The reason why these things happen is because there is no money.”

The WSWS explained that there is plenty of money and resources for housing programs, education and jobs for the working class, but the question is about which class controls the wealth of society. Henry supported the call to build rank-and-file neighborhood committees to demand resources for the funding of public programs to raise the living standards of the working class.

“The politics of Alderman Cardenas are not the kinds of politics we need. We don’t need the politics of the Democrats and the Republicans. While all of this is happening in Little Village, we have Donald Trump in the White House. They are all criminals.”



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