

# Media smears family of victims of Chicago house fire

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Such were the cruel terms upon which their life was possible, that they might never have nor expect a single instant's respite from worry, a single instant in which they were not haunted by the thought of money. They would no sooner escape, as by a miracle, from one difficulty, than a new one would come into view. ... This was in truth not living; it was scarcely even existing, and they felt that it was too little for the price they paid. They were willing to work all the time; and when people did their best, ought they not to be able to keep alive.

—Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

In the wake of the horrific house fire that killed 10 children on Sunday in the working-class Chicago neighborhood of Little Village, various media outlets have sought to divert responsibility for the tragedy from the political establishment and place blame on the mothers of the dead children.

Instead of seeking to understand the real causes behind the fire, articles have appeared in the press vilifying the mothers for neglect. Sensational headlines like “Illinois DCFS drops bombshell as it investigates Little Village sleepover fire deaths,” which appeared in the *Chicago Sun-Times* last week, are aimed at painting the worst possible picture of these victims of a social crime—a product of the concentrated growth of poverty and inequality in major cities in the United States like Chicago.

The *Sun-Times* reported that the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) found one of the mothers who lost five children, Yolanda Ayala, to have been the subject of 21 prior child welfare investigations, 19 of which were found to be unfounded. While these investigations have nothing to do with the immediate cause of the fire, which is still under investigation, the four mothers have come under intense scrutiny.

Thirty-five-year-old Ayala was one of four mothers who lost their children in the house fire. She lost five children in the blaze, including Amayah Almarez, 3 months; Ariel Garcia, 5; Xavier Contreras, 11; Nathan Contreras, 13; Cesar Contreras, 14.

Ayala previously suffered from depression and all the

conditions of poverty in a neighborhood where the average income is less than \$35,000 a year, with a third of households below the poverty line. Nonetheless, she was known to welcome other neighborhood children into her home and take care of them.

Leticia Reyes, Ayala's sister, was the mother of 14-year-old Adrian Hernandez, who died in the fire. Reyes was investigated once in 2007 by the DCFS, but the allegation was unfounded. Sonya Carillo, a friend of Ayala, was the mother of 16-year-old Victor Mendoza, whose great aunt *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to Thursday evening. Carillo was subject to investigations five times by DCFS, with three allegations unfounded.

Priscilla Cobos, whose father spoke to our reporters Wednesday, was the other mother, who lost three children. Her deceased children were Alanni Ayala, 3; Gialanni Ayala, 5; and Giovanni Ayala, 10. Cobos was never the subject of any DCFS investigation.

The past DCFS investigations of the mothers are reflective of the abysmal social conditions they faced, including the lack of jobs and affordable childcare needed to adequately raise children. Alleviating such social ills requires resources, resources that have been transferred from the working class to the rich over many decades. Instead, poverty in working-class families is criminalized.

Recent studies have shown the correlation between inequality and poor conditions for children and families. A report in the *Atlantic* from earlier this year noted: “Three-quarters of child welfare investigations involve neglect rather than physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Where the line is drawn between the routine conditions of poverty and child neglect is particularly vexing. Many struggles common among poor families are officially defined as child maltreatment, including not having enough food, having inadequate or unsafe housing, lacking medical care, or leaving a child alone while you work.”

Chicago's deeply unpopular Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel joined the chorus against the mothers this week and shifted blame from the political establishment, who are chiefly responsible for the growth of poverty, attacks on workers' living standards and poor housing conditions in the city. He instead pointed his fingers at the mothers: “Leaving an infant,

three months old, in the hands of a 16-year-old. What were they thinking?”

The mayor has so far declined to attend any of the vigils held at the site of the fire on Sacramento Avenue. The Democratic alderman representing the Little Village area, George Cardenas, a close ally of Emanuel, has also not attended any of the vigils. Cardenas did make a perfunctory visit to the funeral Saturday of some of the children, but it was largely as a photo opportunity.

Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, who ran for mayor in 2015 against Emanuel—and who has also been promoted by Bernie Sanders in his congressional race this year—has said absolutely nothing about the fire. Garcia was also promoted by the pseudo-left, including the International Socialist Organization. Garcia’s base of operations is centered in the Little Village area.

The silence and contempt of these political figures for the victims of this social tragedy speak to the decades-long complicity of the Democratic Party in creating the conditions for one of the deadliest fires in Chicago since 1958. Under the Democratic Party’s political rule for more than seven decades, thousands of decent jobs in the city for workers have disappeared, leaving many working-class neighborhoods in shambles. Some of the poorest neighborhoods have suffered a total social breakdown, with violence erupting in many parts of the city, affordable housing dismantled, and social safety nets largely dissolved.

Slum housing prevails in many parts of the city’s working-class neighborhoods. By contrast, less than a few miles away, high levels of wealth are concentrated closer to the city’s glitzy downtown and a few neighborhoods on the North side. The rich and the poor live radically different lives in the same city.

Workers living in neighborhoods like Little Village complain of poor housing conditions, including rat infestations, lack of fire alarms and poor insulation during the winter. Landlords operate and manage many buildings in atrocious conditions, with many repeatedly facing city violations and few facing penalties. Such conditions predominate in working-class neighborhoods throughout the city’s West, South and even far North sides.

Merced Gutierrez, the landlord who owned the building where the children died, was subject to more than 40 building code violations, six of which were issued for the rear of the building where the children died in their sleep. The other violations included not providing smoke detectors, as well as having rodent and roach infestations.

The landlord had tried to evict Ayala 10 days prior to the fire for not paying rent. He filed a lawsuit against her and tried to seize possession of the property. In 2016, he evicted Ayala’s mother, Ramoncita Reyes, from the first floor of the building. After Reyes had been evicted, a fire broke out in the first floor and the unit was vacant until another fire killed the children last week.

The deterioration of the living standards for workers in Chicago, as across many parts of the country, is a turning back the clock to conditions workers saw in the early parts of the 20th century, vividly captured in muckraking works such as Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel *The Jungle*.

Moreover, the Chicago Housing Authority has notoriously failed to provide much in the way of housing assistance as the housing crisis is exacerbated by skyrocketing rents in large parts of the city, causing an increase in homelessness. It is impossible for most working families to live in this city without overcrowded conditions. Subsidies for public housing have over the last two decades been funneled into the hands of private developers in the form of grants, loans and tax credits.

Leading figures in the Democratic Party have close ties to many of the city’s worst slumlords. One such figure is former President Barack Obama, who claims Chicago to be his political home. According to a 2008 report from the *Boston Globe*, Obama had ties to many of the slumlords and helped funnel funds for public housing into the hands of private developers under the guise of aiding the poor. Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser to Obama, was one such manager of slum-like properties. She managed a subsidized complex which was seized by the federal government in 2006 for failing city inspections.

Another figure, Antoin Rezko, played a key role in funding and aiding Obama’s political rise. Rezko was a notorious slumlord who used public subsidies to rehabilitate more than 1,000 apartments, which eventually fell into disrepair. Rezko was eventually imprisoned.

Obama visited Chicago last week to do a photo op at Solario Academy High School with Emanuel. The aim of his visit was to discuss plans for his presidential center, which will be built in the city’s economically devastated South Side with an estimated price tag of between \$500 million and \$1 billion. Neither Obama nor Emanuel managed to find the time to visit the site of the fire.



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