

# Residents of Chicago's Little Village speak out against increasing poverty and unaffordable housing

Our reporters  
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Three weeks have passed since an early morning house fire devastated the working-class community of Chicago's Little Village neighborhood on the city's west side. The fire on the 2200 block of Sacramento Avenue killed 10 children, nine of whom were relatives of the same family: Amayah Almaraz, 3 months; Alanni Ayala, 3; Gialanni Ayala, 5; Ariel Garcia, 5; Giovanni Ayala, 10; Xavier Contreras, 11; Nathan Contreras, 13; Adrian Hernandez, 14; Cesar Contreras, 14; and family friend Victor Mendoza, 16.

Reports into the investigation of the fire and its impact on the community have all but disappeared from mainstream media outlets. The Chicago Fire Department reports that the causes of the fire are still under investigation.

A team of *World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited the block on Saturday to speak with residents about the fire's impact on the community.

On the street near the building where the fire occurred, reporters met Mads and Colten, two young workers who live on the street behind the building. They told reporters that they had not heard much about the fire, but spoke on the difficulty of finding affordable rent in the city.

"We were going to live in Pilsen, [the neighborhood to the east of Little Village] but the landlord pulled the rug from under us at the last minute," Mads explained. "The day before we were to move in, he said he gave it to someone else because they were going to pay more."

"A lot of the landlords don't even live around here. They live in California, or other places, and don't keep up with the maintenance. They are just trying to rake in the rent."

Like many young people, Mads expressed disillusionment in the capitalist system. "I feel everything in a capitalist society leads to the richer getting richer and

poorer getting poorer, and nothing is ever going to change until it ultimately fails; and it should."

Later, reporters met with Andrea, who grew up in the adjacent Pilsen neighborhood and moved to Little Village in the early 2000s. A warm and well-spoken person, she offered beverages to the reporters and invited them to see the burnt-out husk of the building from her house.

Andrea described the nightmarish experience of waking up to see the wall of flame engulf the building behind, which had damaged her home as well. "It was about 4:30 in the morning when my neighbor came around, screaming and banging on the window. When I got out I looked over and saw a wall of fire. The house behind us was engulfed. I knew the kids who died, because they would play around the back of the house sometimes.

"The smoke detectors went off right away in the other buildings next to it—once they picked it up. It took about an hour for the fire department to come, and they found smoke detectors in the building, but no working batteries."

During the investigation carried out by the Chicago Fire Department immediately following, the CFD noted that if the residents had been woken by smoke detectors, they would have been able to escape unharmed.

"I've never seen anything like this happen since I've lived here," Andrea continued, "we have kids who live in our building and they cannot go out in back because just being out here gives you a somber feeling. I have two kids, and we're looking to move because we have to see this every day. I had to clean some of the debris up myself, and all the while I was traumatized by the reminder of where it came from."

Andrea spoke candidly of the high levels of poverty in the area and the city's efforts to gentrify, that is to attract a wealthier social stratum to the neighborhood. "This is

an up-and-coming neighborhood, I can see it. Rent's going up and people who live here don't have a way to make ends meet so they end up having to move out to places on the South Side like the Back-of-the-Yards neighborhood.

"We are struggling with rent control right now in this community. There is a lot of gentrification going on in Pilsen, and the landlords have noticed that and so they keep increasing the rents here. My apartment used to be \$400 per month in 2010; now it's \$750.

"On minimum wage, it eats up about one-and-a-half of my paychecks. I collect food that the church gives away in order to make my payments." Andrea noted she works part-time as a personal shopper for Instacart, a grocery delivery service which relies upon cheap, piecemeal labor and app technology, similar to Uber, as well as a second part-time job in the food service industry, and is currently looking for a third.

A WSWS reporter asked Andrea if she thought that there was any way that representatives of the Democratic Party in Chicago could resolve the issues which plagued the community, given the lack of response by Democratic Alderman George Cardenas and Mayor Rahm Emmanuel.

"They're not capable, because they don't see the benefit. They are just looking out for themselves and helping whoever makes a profit. They'll do something only if it's at minimum cost. We're the poor, and if they want to kick us out to increase the property value, then they'll do it."

Andrea supported the call to form a neighborhood committee to carry out an independent investigation of the fire and put forth demands based on what the members of the community need to improve their living standards, in opposition to the political parties of the ruling class.

"I think that is definitely needed here. The people in this community need to be educated on these issues. You could come out here and talk to people more often or hold workshops and put up posters."

The fire in Little Village has laid bare the social dynamics of the capitalist system which lie at the root of the problems faced by the working class throughout the city and worldwide. Decades of successive Democratic administrations in Chicago have starved the city of funding for safe and affordable housing programs, jobs programs, and education, while giving tax breaks and incentives to corporations and real estate investors which offer nothing to the working class but low-wage jobs, forcing them to live in substandard housing and cramped conditions.

The city's Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel has presided over a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the ruling elite. Since he was elected in 2011, Emanuel has closed 50 elementary schools, severely limited access to public housing units, and cut funding to the Chicago Fire Department.

Democratic Alderman of the 22nd Ward, George Cardenas, had ignored the multiple building code violations against the landlord, which include several electrical violations. Cardenas has attempted to shift blame for the tragedy from the city's shoulders and onto the mother of six of the children who were killed.

The building had failed four of seven inspections over the last three years and was the site of a February 2017 fire on the second floor, which was not fatal. However, firefighters found no smoke detectors present during the investigation.

The families of the deceased children and the residents affected by the fire deserve answers. They will not get them through the city administration or any of the various middle-class organizations which orbit the Democratic Party. The formation of a neighborhood committee is needed to demand an end to poverty and poor housing conditions through the implementation of a multi-billion-dollar public works program to re-build the city's neighborhoods without displacing working class residents.

Such a committee will need to link up with hotel workers, over 5,000 of whom are currently on strike in the city, UPS workers, autoworkers, and the working class all over the world to put an end to capitalism and replace it with a planned economy capable of meeting the needs of the vast majority of society, not just the wealthy few.



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