

House fire at vacant property kills two in Hamtramck, Michigan

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A tragic scene unfolded in Hamtramck, Michigan yesterday morning, as the latest house fire in the US claimed two lives. Neighbors awoke at around 7:30 a.m. to the sound of fire truck sirens and saw the home at 2731 Cody Street in flames.

The victims' identities have not yet been released. Firefighters found their badly burned bodies on the house's second floor.

Neighbors told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the house was officially vacant but had been occupied for at least two years by a homeless man named Tony, who they said was around 40 years old and of Albanian origin. The cause of the fire has not been determined.

Angela, a US Postal Service clerk, has lived in the house next door for two years. One of the firefighters told her the occupant had tried to fix up a warm living space in the upstairs section of the house in preparation for the fall and winter. The house had no electricity or heating. Temperatures over the weekend dipped into the mid-forties (5-10 degrees Celsius).

"It still shocks me," Angela said. "I can't believe that they cut off people's heat and electricity. It's just very sad. I know he had a son. There are people freezing to death in Detroit and so many homeless people.

"Apart from the roof, the house looked the same before the fire," she said. "Tony used to always come and go through the back door, but then the whole back part of the house sort of collapsed and got warped, and he started coming in through the front." Angela said she didn't think Tony had a regular job and that he was very poor. He would sometimes ask neighbors to borrow their phone. A year before the fire, someone had died from a drug overdose in the house's garage.

Angela noted that there were nice houses in Hamtramck like the one that Tony was living in that were abandoned and unoccupied, including another in

the block behind her house. According to the Homeless Action Network of Detroit, around 11,000 people were homeless at some point in 2017, and around 3,800 were homeless on any given night. As of 2014, the most recently available figure, there were approximately 80,000 vacant buildings in the city.

"I don't believe that the rich people should have everything," Angela said. "They should increase our wages and make everyone equal. But instead it's just, 'No, I'm rich and you're poor.' You go around Detroit and you see these huge, beautiful homes, but so many of them are abandoned."

Rabin, a 17-year-old high school student who immigrated to the US with his family from Bangladesh and lives a few doors down from the house fire, said, "When I was in Bangladesh I thought America would have all these opportunities for people to get a good job and live in a nice house and that these sorts of things wouldn't happen. I've found the same thing here that's happening all over the world." He commented that there were "a lot of broken homes that belong to the bank."

Hamtramck is a two-square-mile enclave surrounded by Detroit. It is in the poorest zip code in Michigan, and it is also the state's most international city, home to a large number of Polish, Yemeni, and Bangladeshi immigrants, as well as many from the Balkan countries of Eastern Europe. Like Detroit, much of the housing in Hamtramck belonged to autoworkers and their families in the mid-20th century, when Detroit autoworkers' living standards were the highest in the world.

The Dodge Main assembly was opened in Hamtramck in 1911 as Chrysler's flagship plant. Thousands of immigrant workers, mainly from Poland, came to the city to work at the plant or one of the two dozen other factories that sprang up as feeder

operations. The city's population exploded over the following decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, the city had a cultural nightlife including jazz music, which has now disappeared.

Hamtramck has been hit by the ruling-class offensive against the working class from the 1980s onwards that has been overseen by the United Auto Workers and AFL-CIO. Dodge Main was demolished in 1981. American Axle, another auto plant in the city, was demolished in 2013.

Across the United States, fire departments respond to over 350,000 house fires every year, which kill over 3,000 people. Many of these are entirely preventable and are the outcome of substandard safety and housing regulations and utility shutoffs, which cause poor and working-class residents to use unsafe space heaters to keep warm. In Detroit, fires broke out at more than 10,000 buildings between 2013 and 2015, killing 120 people.

DTE Energy, the utility monopoly that regularly shuts off electricity to working-class and other low-income residents, made \$1.1 billion in profits last year after benefiting from Trump's corporate tax cuts.

More than half a million people are homeless across the United States, and approximately 150,000 are homeless on any given night. According to estimates, it would cost approximately \$11 billion to house every one of these people. This is approximately one-hundredth of the annual US military budget that goes towards destroying the lives and homes of workers across the world and preparing for nuclear war, and one sixteenth of the personal wealth of Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon.



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