

Another day, another horror in America: Five children killed in Youngstown, Ohio, house fire

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Daybreak Monday brought news of yet another horrific tragedy in the United States. Fire officials in Youngstown, Ohio, confirmed that five children had been killed, and their 26-year-old mother, America “Amy” Negron-Acevedo, severely injured after fire engulfed their home late Sunday night.

Negron-Acevedo has been transferred to the MetroHealth Burn Center in nearby Cleveland. She survived the fire by jumping out of a second-floor window. Residents on the block were alerted to the fire as Negron-Acevedo ran down the street, injured, screaming for help to save her children.

The five deceased children have been identified as Aleysha Rosario, 9; Charles Gunn, 3; Ly’Asia Gunn, 2; and Brianna and Arianna Negron, one-year-old twins. Two of the children were found dead by firefighters who rushed into the house at 434 Parkcliffe Avenue, while three died later at the hospital.

According to neighbors, the family had only been living in the house for less than half a year. Negron-Acevedo works for Century Container, a plastic container manufacturer half an hour’s drive outside Youngstown, where the average wage for a shift supervisor is less than \$13 an hour. Even if she were making this amount, at full time it would have placed Negron-Acevedo and her children well below the poverty line, leaving her with the only option of renting substandard housing.

Two firefighters were injured in the rescue effort, one serious enough to be taken to the hospital for treatment. Youngstown City Fire Chief Barry Finley told reporters that the tragedy had also taken a heavy emotional toll. “It’s extremely hard. We have a relatively young department, and most the guys have children. So, it hits

pretty hard, and the fact that it’s so close to Christmas hits even harder.”

While the immediate cause of Sunday’s fire remains under investigation, temperatures in Youngstown fell into the low 20s Fahrenheit over the weekend. During the winter months, families often turn to unsafe space heaters to avoid high heating bills or to keep warm when utilities have been shut off over unpaid bills, contributing to a higher number of house fires.

The tragedy that struck Negron-Acevedo’s family is not an isolated event. More than 3,400 people were killed in structure fires across the US in 2017. The majority died in their homes. Earlier this year, a blaze that consumed a house in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood killed ten children between the ages of three months and 16 years old. In that case, there were no functional smoke alarms in the home to alert the sleeping children to the fire.

Whatever the specific causes and circumstances, such tragedies arise out of definite social, economic and political processes.

Youngstown is one of many cities across the Midwest that has been devastated by four decades of deindustrialization and the destruction of tens of thousands of decent paying jobs in steel mills and machine shops. Since the day in September 1977, known as Black Monday, when the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company announced its closure, the city’s population has been reduced by more than half.

Today, nearly 40 percent of Youngstown’s residents live below the poverty line. A 2014 report found that more than 63 percent of children in the city were growing up in poverty, placing the city just behind Flint, Michigan, with the worst child poverty rate in the

country. The destruction of jobs and the explosion in poverty that followed the economic crisis a decade ago has fueled an opioid overdose crisis across the US, with the region around Youngstown a center of the crisis in Ohio. Last year, 245 people died of drug overdoses, an increase of 23 percent over the previous year.

With its property tax base wiped out by factory closures and ensuing depopulation, the city has struggled to cover the cost of basic social services, including the fire department. Earlier this year, the city removed one firetruck from service and demoted nine firefighters in order to cut their pay, as part of an effort to cover a projected \$15 million budget shortfall for the city over the next five years. “We all have to tighten our belt to be more fiscally responsible with the city’s money,” Fire Chief Finely told media at the time.

That such sums could constitute a financial crisis is exposed as absurd by the fact that Ohio’s richest man, Les Wexner (net worth \$6.1 billion), owns a \$100 million yacht, enough to pay the salaries of more than 2,200 firefighters for an entire year. The vessel, which goes by the name *Limitless*, is one of the world’s largest private superyachts, specially built in 1997 by German ship maker Lürssen for Wexner, the chairman and CEO of L Brands corporation (Victoria’s Secret).

Indeed, limitless sums are made available for the whims of the corporate and financial elite, while basic social services are decimated—with the inevitable consequences.

The destruction of Youngstown has been overseen by Democrats and Republicans at the state and local level, with the city being hollowed out over the last 40 years under the control of Democratic mayors. Nationally, under Obama and now Trump, there has been an intensification of the assault on the working class. Whatever their conflicts, both parties agree on the transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich, while hundreds of billions are allocated every year to finance the weapons of destruction and war.

The United Auto Workers, United Steelworkers and other unions have facilitated the destruction of jobs, working hand in hand with the Democrats. For decades, the increasingly wealthy executives that control these organizations have collaborated in the decimation of living standards for the workers they claim to represent.

The social crisis that has ravaged Youngstown and the surrounding Mahoning Valley is set to worsen as

GM, the largest industrial employer in the area, is planning to shutter its Lordstown assembly plant just 17 miles west of Negron-Acevedo’s home.

GM’s plans to close Lordstown along with plants in Detroit, Michigan and Oshawa, Ontario, will be a death sentence for countless workers and their children, tearing apart families and social networks. For the company’s executives, board members and investors, the social inferno they are preparing will pad their bottom line, while funneling millions to wealthy investors.

This underscores the crucial importance of the meeting hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* on Sunday, which adopted a resolution for the formation of rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees, independent of the unions. The resolution stressed that the consequences of the job cuts would be felt far beyond the workers immediately impacted. The struggle of autoworkers to defend their jobs and wages must be connected to a broad struggle of the working class.

Such tragedies as that which befell the Negron-Acevedo family, and many more like it, are entirely preventable. Billions must be allocated to construct modern fire-resistant housing, including the use of smoke detectors and much more advanced technologies, along with an infusion of funding into fire departments. A safe and affordable house is a basic social right that must be guaranteed to all.

To secure these rights, the working class must be organized in a political struggle that takes direct aim at the wealth and prerogatives of the financial aristocracy. Capitalism, which ensures the inalienable right of the rich to profit, must be overthrown and replaced with socialism, the reorganization of society on the basis of equality and social need.



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