Three children dead, four others injured in Imlay City, Michigan mobile home fire

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A fire rapidly consumed a mobile home in Imlay City, Michigan, an hour north of Detroit, early Tuesday morning tragically claiming the lives of three young children and injuring four others.

Keyanna Kelly, 3, Keyondre Kelly, 5, and Keith Kelly, 6, were all pronounced dead after being rushed to an area hospital. Their father, Keith Kelly Sr., 42, and mother, Krystal Whitney, 29, along with their two other children, Keyshawn, 18 months, and Keyairah, one month, are all being treated for burns and smoke inhalation.

Firefighters who arrived on the scene around 3 a.m. found Whitney yelling for help to get her family out of the burning home. The front half of the house had been engulfed in flames, impeding rescue efforts by the mother and first responders.

"All I could hear was this lady screaming, and then this voice shouting 'which room are they in!?'" Jonathan, a construction worker who lives 100 feet away in another mobile home, told the WSWS. "I looked out my window and this house was just engulfed in flames. I woke up my wife, and we said, 'Let's get the kids out of here!' It was so close to us! It was a scary situation, but we all got outside.

"Then an ambulance parked right here in my driveway, and they were just bringing kid after kid out of that house. A newborn baby was screaming as they pulled him out of the fire, and officers were carrying a kid and saying, 'Stay with me, keep breathing!'"

"I could see the smoke from my house," Christopher, a high school freshman who lives down the street, noted. "I knew the dad because I used to plow their snow. He was really nice to us. I knew the kids because they used to go to Weston Elementary."

"It was a tinderbox, there's no doubt about it," Imlay City Police Chief Scott Pike told reporters at a press conference Tuesday. "It burned immensely fast, and it was very extreme heat."

While the cause of the fire is still under investigation, Pike explained that the home's furnace had not been working and that a space heater or another heating source used to compensate likely caused the blaze. The temperature had dropped to 16 degrees Fahrenheit ?9 Celsius) Monday night into Tuesday morning.

"From what I heard, their furnace wasn't working and they just used this small heater," Jonathan said. "It feels like it's an every-year thing here in this trailer park. But this one is the worst. Last year we had one around the corner that burned, but it was just one room."

With nearly half of American adults reporting that they would be unable to afford a $400 emergency expense, it would not have been unusual for the family to turn to a cheaper heating alternative while they saved enough money to get their furnace repaired.

There has been an immediate outpouring of support for the Kelly family in the neighborhood and online. A candlelight vigil was held for the victims outside the house Tuesday night. As of this writing, more than $8,000 has been raised on a GoFundMe page to aid the family with medical bills and other expenses.

"I've lived here about twelve years. It's a nice community," Jonathan noted. "In the summer people are always out and walking around. Everybody knows everybody. They know how many kids you have. The school staff here is amazing. So, when something like this happens, it shocks the community."

Imlay City, a small working-class community of approximately 3,500 residents 56 miles north of Detroit and 35 miles east of Flint, is the site of auto parts

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manufacturing and agricultural processing. Approximately 25 percent of residents lived below the poverty line in 2016, with a median household income of just $31,000.

One of the largest employers in the area is Vlasic Pickles, which operates a processing plant that produces more than 150 million jars of pickle products every year. Immediately across the road from the trailer park where the fire broke out is Toyo Seat, an auto parts manufacturer where workers make seats and other parts for Nissan, Mazda and Toyota. Many of those who live in the trailer park work in construction or commute to surrounding areas to work low-wage jobs.

“My dad works around the area. He works outside and does construction on basements,” Christopher explained. “He gets about $15 an hour. My mom used to get paid $10.50 an hour for 11 years. They never gave her a raise when she was working in Lapeer at Mold-Masters Engineering. She had a heart attack, and she got removed from her job. Then she worked at a fabric company where she got paid $7.50 an hour. She left that job since there was no heat, and she was breathing smoke in because nothing was in there to [ventilate] the smoke.”

So far this year, there have been more than 430 home fire fatalities across the United States. More than 2,300 deaths were reported last year. That so many could perish in their homes in the wealthiest country in the world is a damning indictment of the capitalist system. House fires are the outcome not of individual failings. They are a social crime committed against the working class by the ruling elite which dominates society.

While American corporations pour hundreds of billions into stock buybacks to enrich their wealthy shareholders, workers are forced to live on poverty wages that compel them and their families to live in substandard conditions. Mobile homes are among the cheapest and deadliest housing options for workers. Constructed out of little more than plywood, plastic siding and insulation, they are tinderboxes for fires in the winter and can be blown to splinters by tornadoes in the spring.

“I think Imlay City should provide people with heating systems,” Christopher said when asked what could have been done to prevent Tuesday’s fire. “They could have got help from the city. But probably Imlay City wouldn’t want to give them help. But they should, so these tragedies don’t happen in the winter.”

“I think people should provide heaters and stuff, start an organization to save up money to buy things they need,” his cousin Gonzalo, a 6th grade student, added. “Because instead of using actual furnaces, people use their stove, and that can potentially catch on fire and blow up.”

“Billionaires get way more money than they even need,” Christopher concluded. “We should get rights, too. People should get paid not to their abilities but to their needs. If someone gets injured, they should get paid more because they’re going to need money for a doctor or for prescriptions.”

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