

Prioritizing of profit at root of fire that killed seven Syrian refugee children in Nova Scotia

Frédéric Charlebois
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On February 19, the Bahro family, which fled the Syrian war in 2017 and ultimately settled in the suburb of Spryfield on the outskirts of Halifax, was decimated by a devastating fire. The fire destroyed the Bahro residence, took the lives of the family's seven children and seriously injured the father, leaving the mother in a state of emotional shock. A wave of sympathy for the grieving parents has spread across Nova Scotia and indeed all of Canada.

Local fire departments began receiving calls alerting them to the fire at 12:41 AM, shortly after it erupted, and firefighters arrived about six minutes later. Despite the speed of the first responders, none of the seven children, including the four oldest, aged 8 to 15, managed to escape the flames. Although the fire was quickly contained, neighbours and firefighters have attested to the speed and intensity of the fire.

The Halifax Fire Department's investigation is ongoing, but the rapid spread of the blaze throughout the two-story house reflects a type of fire that is becoming more and more frequent, particularly for relatively new homes. The Bahro residence was built in 2014.

Vince Mackenzie, Fire Chief of Grand Falls-Windsor, Newfoundland and a member of the Maritime Fire Chiefs' Board of Directors, said that due to the construction materials that are now commonly used, as well as the abundance of plastic objects, fires can burn 8 to 9 times faster than when he started his career 35 years ago.

For Mackenzie and many firefighter associations, such as the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, the installation of automated sprinklers should be mandatory in all homes as sprinklers have consistently been shown to save lives. Many recommendations have been made in recent years to require this and other

changes to the building code, but haven't been acted on because they conflict with the profit interests of big business.

Phil Rizcallah, Director of Research and Development for the Construction Sector at the National Research Council of Canada, raised the possibility of changes to the building code following the Spryfield tragedy. But he made clear that the priority should remain the huge profits of construction contractors. Referring to sprinklers, Rizcallah said: "It isn't safety at all costs," adding that it must be "safety at a reasonable cost, because you can make it so that it's unaffordable, ... [I]f nobody can actually afford a home then you've missed the boat."

Such a statement is intended to mislead the public in a context where house prices in Canada have soared in recent years. In Canada the median price of a two-story house, although lower in a small-city suburb like Spryfield, is \$715,000. According to Mackenzie, the addition of automated sprinklers would cost 1 to 2 per cent of the price of a new construction and 5 per cent in an existing home, yet they are not being added because building contractors and the financial institutions that lend to them don't want to reduce their profit margins.

Similar profit motives are defended by companies and the powers that be in the choice of materials and design of houses. They are looking to use materials that reduce installation time or purchasing costs. Fire resistance is at best an afterthought.

Fire departments throughout the country are aware that new houses are made of materials that facilitate the rapid spread of fire. According to Halifax Fire Chief Dave Meldrum, "New homes are built with lightweight construction materials. Once fire barriers are penetrated, rapid fire spread is possible in new construction."

For example, contractors use inferior quality lumber or composite materials such as chipboard instead of plywood. For interiors, gypsum sheets that are heavy and more difficult to handle have been replaced by less expensive and lighter pre-finished panels. At the structural level, the easier to handle and more practical I-beams have replaced the solid wooden columns and beams of the past, which had a longer resistance to flames.

Even in plumbing, plastic PVC pipes are replacing metal pipes and one could extrapolate for each of the trades from exterior cladding to electricity. The furniture industry also uses more flammable materials in its products.

In terms of design, houses traditionally had many rooms, separated by doors. Instead, new homes have many open areas, which facilitates the spread of flames.

The Bahro residence included several of the materials named above and was designed with wide open areas.

The Spryfield tragedy resembles a series of other horrific fires in recent years that also had a direct link to inadequate safety standards or non-compliance with them. In 2014, 32 people lost their lives in a seniors' residence in Isle-Verte, Quebec. The residence had a newer section with sprinklers and an older section that did not. While the section equipped with sprinklers was largely spared from the flames, the residents in the other section were unable to escape in time.

Another infamous case is the Grenfell Tower fire in the United Kingdom, which killed at least 72 people. The exterior cladding of the high-rise, which was the main cause of the blaze's very rapid spread, had been chosen to save 5000 Euros and didn't even meet the already insufficient requirements of the British building code.

In all these cases, the deaths were avoidable and unnecessary. There is ample technical knowledge and material means to prevent fires and slow their spread when they occur. Based on this knowledge, the building code could be greatly strengthened to place the safety of occupants first.

But this is impossible under capitalism. Current construction norms are a consequence of the ongoing deregulation demanded by large corporations and implemented by the authorities. Moreover, the resulting problems are compounded by cuts to fire safety and other public services. Thus, it is working people who

are once again paying the price for a system that subordinates their basic needs—including access to safe and affordable housing—to the profits of a super-rich minority.



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