

“They said they were going to fix everything—people still are hurting”

## One year since the Chicago house fire that killed ten children

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One year ago, services were held for 10 children—Maya Almaraz, 3 months; Lonni Ayala, 3 years; Ariel Garcia, 5; Gialanni Ayala, 5; Giovanni Ayala, 10; Xavier Contreras, 11; Nathan Contreras, 13; Adrian Hernandez, 14; Cesar Contreras, 15; and Victor Mendoza, 16. The children perished in the early morning of August 26, 2018 in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood.

Reverberations from that tragedy continue to haunt the neighborhood. In front of 2224 South Sacramento Avenue stand 10 wooden crosses bearing the names of the children with tokens of affection, flowers, small icons and candles adorning the makeshift memorial in their memory. Empty bottles of beer and cigarette butts litter the sidewalk and steps from recent gatherings.

The windows of the house and its adjoining properties remain boarded despite promises that demolition and reconstruction projects were to begin in July. In the coach house where the children were sleeping, the structure remains charred and in shambles. Through a peephole in the alleyway, strewn wires and burnt siding remains piled, making it inaccessible. Nothing has changed.

Andrea, a 30-year-old Hispanic mother of two children who lives nearby the site of the fire, still vividly recalls the night the fire broke out. “They have essentially abandoned this place,” she told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team. “They said they were going to fix everything. People still are hurting, and they have to look at this every day. Lucy, my neighbor, had to move because of stress and anxiety.”

Solemnly looking over the memorials, she said, “The family gathered here last week. Reporters have been here too. Yolanda [Yolanda Ayala lost five children that night and has been the subject of controversy and blamed by the media and 12th Ward alderman for the death of the children] has been in hiding. She doesn’t want to speak to reporters.”

The fire was only one symptom of life in Little Village, echoed throughout Chicago’s poor and working-class neighborhoods. The brutal poverty inflicting these neighborhoods manifests itself daily in social life.

As Andrea surveyed the neighborhood, she indicated to a few young tattooed young men standing on the edge of the sidewalk engaged in boisterous conversations. She noted they are in gangs and suggested to change route. “That house with the open door is where they sell their drugs,” motioning to a nondescript but dilapidated two-story. The scent of barbecue wafts over, and music can be heard arising from nearby homes as people gather to celebrate the Labor Day weekend.

Andrea pointed to a refurbished property a block down from hers on Whipple Street. The owner has listed it for rent at \$1,300 a month for a two-bedroom. Most living in the neighborhood are being priced out of range and are looking to relocate. “I’m thinking of moving to ‘back of the yards.’ It’ll be closer to my work.” That neighborhood is located on the southwest side of the city in the South Side district adjacent to Little Village. The area was home to the famous Union Stock Yards that closed in 1971. The median household income in these neighborhoods is barely above \$30,000 per year.

The Chicago Fire Department closed their investigation to last year’s fire, in February citing that an open flame led to the tragedy, but not commenting if the fire was an accident or set intentionally. Their final report is pending release at the request of federal authorities who are also looking into the origin of the fire.

Soon after the fire had been extinguished and the magnitude of the tragedy was revealed, the media and political establishment led by Twelfth Ward Alderman George Cardenas, head of the Chicago City Council’s Latino Caucus and a close supporter of former Democratic

Mayor Rahm Emanuel, directed their vitriolic attack against Ms. Ayala for leaving the children unattended without any adult supervision. They frequently noted that the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services had investigated her 22 times since 2004 in an attempt to shift primary culpability for the tragedy in the eyes of the public onto the tragic figure of this defenseless woman.

Additionally, the landlord, 80-year-old Merced Gutierrez, has come under significant scrutiny by city inspectors, who cited in 2015 that he failed to place smoke detectors in the units where the fire had broken out. The building was also subject to two inspections in June and July of 2018; one prompted by a tenant complaint which found two electrical violations and the second by police with concerns for gang disturbances. During the initial inspection after the fire, officials were only able to locate one smoke detector without a working battery and no carbon monoxide detectors. Mr. Gutierrez has yet to obtain a permit despite a court order to demolish the coach house by September 1.

The property, more than 100 years old, has a long history of complaints by tenants and failed city inspections, with findings ranging from the presence of vermin to extreme neglect and disrepair.

Priscilla Cobos, mother of three of the children that died that night (Giovanni Ayala, 10; Gialanni Ayala, 5; and Alanni Ayala, 3), filed a lawsuit in March against the city, Alderman Cardenas and Mr. Merced Gutierrez, the building owner. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, “In the wrongful death lawsuit filed in Cook County Circuit Court, Cobos accuses the city and Cardenas of ignoring code violations at the property where the fire happened, and allowed the owner, Merced Gutierrez, to continue operating the property as apartments despite the violations.”

Such factors ultimately express something larger, systemic and social, and even more fundamentally, historical and economic.

The *Chicago Tribune*, in an editorial last week, asked the following: “From a perspective outside the investigation, these details suggest a series of ‘what-ifs’: What if the coach house had working smoke and carbon monoxide detectors? What if an adult had been present? What, exactly, sparked the open flame?”

A better question would be, what fueled the blaze?

As the WSWs noted at the time of the fire, “Responsibility for this tragedy lies squarely with the ruling class and its political representatives.” Both parties of the capitalist ruling class, the Democrats and Republicans alike, have been the overseers of the massive growth of social inequality that has devastated community after community.

In particular, the Democratic Party in Chicago has played a leading role in implementing brutal policies that have led to

the destruction of jobs, unemployment, rampant poverty, violence, disease and death. This includes the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs that once existed in manufacturing, like auto and steel in Chicago’s South Side, being replaced by low-income jobs; the largest mass closings of public schools in the United States; the laying off of thousands of teachers and attacks on their pay and pensions; the mass shuttering of mental health facilities.

There has been a continued cover-up of police violence and murder, like that of Laquan McDonald, in which current Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot played a leading role as a former federal prosecutor and head of the Chicago Police Board, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) Office of Professional Standards and the Civilian Office of Police Accountability.

The impoverishment of the working class in neighborhoods in Chicago, throughout the US, and internationally—forcing workers into squalor, unsafe homes and neighborhoods, low-pay, hunger, disease, lack of culture and education, crippling anxiety, depression, violence, drug abuse and the like—flows from the policies of the Democratic Party and capitalist profit system.

These policies have created the historically interconnected conditions that ultimately fueled the spark that led to last year’s tragedy. Since the time of the Little Village fire, the same processes that led to a fire in one of Chicago’s poor, working class neighborhoods have led to more fire tragedies.

- In January, a teenager and young adult died in a house fire in Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood.
- In February, a house fire killed Kathy Gomez, a 52-year-old teacher in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood.
- In March, a 5-year-old girl died after a fire broke out in her house in Chicago’s Englewood neighborhood.
- In April, one person died and six people were displaced after a fire broke out in a home on Chicago’s northwest side. Also, two more people, Richard Henning, 92, and Brian Bachman, 52, died in a house fire on Chicago’s West Side.
- In August, a house fire in Chicago’s Park Manor neighborhood killed one and injured three. Later in the month, a 39-year-old died at home in Chicago’s Avondale neighborhood after being consumed by a fire.



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