

Two Detroit children dead in Christmas morning house fire

James Brewer
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Two young Detroit children died in a Christmas morning fire as they slept near their family's Christmas tree in their East side home. The evening before, the boys, De'Lon Wheeler, 7, and Damarion Wheeler, 6, were so excited to open presents in the morning that they stayed downstairs by the tree in anticipation. Their bodies, burned beyond recognition, were found by firefighters as they entered the front room the next morning.

The fire department told local media that the cause of the house fire is still being investigated but "appeared to be accidental." Fire Commissioner David Fornell called it "definitely a Christmas tragedy."

According to Fornell, "it did not appear the house had a functioning central furnace," adding, "we're kind of looking at that." The family used several space heaters placed in different areas in the house to provide heat. There were no smoke detectors. The boys' mother, Demika Pinson, awoke about 8:30 a.m., initially unaware of the disaster, to find the rooms filled with smoke and a "black curtain" blocking access to the downstairs. She shouted to her oldest son, Darius, 10, who was also upstairs with his sister Delilah, 8, to get himself and Delilah out of the house. Then she cradled her 2-year-old, Di'Yior, in her arms and jumped out the second floor window.

Shortly afterward, Darius and Delilah emerged through the front door. All four were taken to local hospitals. The two older children were being treated for third degree burns and the mother and her toddler were released with minor injuries. Pinson tested positive for the COVID-19 virus, and she has not been able to visit her children in the hospital.

The fire department is planning to get information from the children when they can speak. While Fornell didn't definitively blame the fire on the space heaters,

he spoke about the danger inherent in their use: "The most important thing is to keep drapes, blankets or anything flammable away from them."

"Another thing is that you can't put too many in the house, because it may overload electrical circuits. We've seen fires where people have used multiple extension cords. Space heaters should be plugged directly into an outlet. Every extension cord could be a danger."

Winter in Detroit, as in cities across the northern US, is an extreme hardship for families in poverty, who struggle to pay for heating expenses and live under the constant threat of having their utilities turned off. This winter will be even more difficult, as millions more people have become unemployed over the course of the pandemic. However, those who are "lucky" enough to still have a job are forced to risk their lives inside factories and workplaces which are vectors for virus transmission. Low-wage temporary workers are compelled under duress into plants to replace infected employees or those who decide to stay home.

The Christmas Day fire bears striking similarities to a fire on Dexter Avenue in January 2010, which led to the deaths of disabled brothers Tyrone and Marvin Allen, which was followed by another deadly fire on Bangor Street in March. Both fires occurred after energy utility DTE had cut off heat and electricity to their homes. Sylvia Young, a mother who lost three children in the Bangor Street fire, was subjected to a vicious media and legal witch-hunt which attempted to pin the blame for the fire on her supposed "negligence."

In response, the Socialist Equality Party convened the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire, which found a direct connection between utility shutoffs, unemployment and poverty and house fires, declared

that DTE was responsible for the deaths of all five children and that Young was the victim of a frame-up. The SEP also founded the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs, which campaigned in defense of utilities as a basic social right.

Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan has recently announced a moratorium on water shutoffs through 2021, but there is no such consideration to compel the privately owned utility, DTE Energy, from cutting off gas and electricity for lack of payment. The ability of families to live in a secure and safe home is a social right.

The response of the corporate oligarchy to the increase in poverty and the associated number of house fires is to introduce training to all firefighters in “arson detection.” Insurance companies, faced with claims on fire disasters, demand the first point of investigation be whether the catastrophe is legitimate.

Events like this terrible one on Christmas are not simply “misfortunes.” They are crimes of capitalism. The so-called relief bill passed by Congress provided billions for corporations and a slap in the face to the working class. The underlying conditions behind tragic incidents like this are imposed upon the population by a bipartisan pro-capitalist government.

The corporate media makes little of the fact that Pinson’s household had no central heating. Critical readers should ask “Why?” It cannot be accepted that this is an individual problem. It is a class crime.

Attempting to heat a home solely with space heaters is a disaster in the making. According to the National Fire Protection Association, space heaters are the cause of 86 percent of civilian deaths from home fires caused by heating equipment.

Pinson’s sister has set up a Gofundme page to raise funds for funeral expenses which has received overwhelming support. With an initial goal of raising \$5,000, it has already raised over \$28,000.



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