

Democrats attempt to deflect blame for deadly Bronx fire

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“Shut your door! Shut your door!” That was the refrain New York City Mayor Eric Adams repeatedly uttered at his press conference Monday, highlighting the role that two open doors played in the mechanics of the deadly blaze Sunday.

Adams’s selective focus was intended to shield the city government and the social order it defends from any blame for the horrific consequences of New York’s deadliest fire in more than three decades. Adams made no reference to the responsibility of the landlords, who profit handsomely from housing low-income tenants, to ensure basic fire-protection measures like self-closing doors that function correctly. He avoided any mention of the COVID-19 policies that have resulted in gross understaffing of ambulance workers and firefighters. And he issued not a word about the underlying poverty and other social conditions that make tragedies like Sunday’s increasingly common.

Instead, he framed the devastation as a result of the mistakes of the victims.

Sunday’s fire at Twin Parks North West has thus far killed 17, including eight children. The toll was revised downward Monday after officials initially “double-counted” two fatalities. However, as of Monday, another 15 remain in critical condition. The deaths and life-threatening injuries were mostly due to smoke inhalation, according to FDNY Commissioner Daniel Nigro.

The high-rise apartment building in the Bronx housed mainly low-income tenants, including a tight-knit community of immigrants from the Gambia, which has been devastated by the fire.

Officials confirmed Monday that the cause of the blaze was a malfunction in a space heater that had been running continuously for days. Temperatures during the nights before the fire dropped well below freezing.

Commissioner Nigro said that the space heater supplemented the heat provided by the building, which was on at the time of the fire.

Space heaters are common in New York City apartments during the winter months, especially in working-class residences where thermostats are controlled centrally by for-profit landlords. They are also highly dangerous—many of the cheaper models available for purchase lack critical safety features. The US Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that space heaters cause around 25,000 fires and 300 deaths each year nationally.

Sunday’s fire was limited to the third floor, where it began. However, thick smoke spread rapidly throughout the high-rise, transported via the stairwell to higher levels. Commissioner Nigro pointed to two open doors, one on the third floor and another on the 15th floor, that allowed the dense column of smoke to fill the building.

While Adams stressed the failure of residents fleeing for their lives to close the door manually, fire codes require that stairwell and apartment doors close on their own, precisely to avoid leaving it up to the split-second decision of individuals in a state of panic. Nigro confirmed that the building was equipped with self-closing doors, but that they malfunctioned.

The residents of Twin Parks also suffered from a lack of fire protection like that afforded to occupants of many luxury high-rises that have sprouted up like mushrooms across New York City in the last decade. Newly built residential towers include measures such as fire dampers, which shut off a building’s ventilation system during a fire to prevent the spread of smoke, and positively pressurized stairwells to keep exit routes clear.

The real estate industry has succeeded in preventing

life-saving fire-protection measures like sprinkler systems from being mandated for existing buildings in the city on account of their costs.

In avoiding these issues, Adams and the Democratic Party seek to shield their wealthy backers in the real estate industry. Personifying this connection is Rick Gropper, a part-owner of Twin Parks North West, the same man whom Adams appointed to his transition team after winning the mayoralty.

However, there is far more at play than mutual back-scratching or personal corruption. Adams combines his shameless pro-business bootlicking with expressions of sympathy for the working class. During the press conference, Adams interjected that by stressing the need to shut doors during a fire, “What we don’t want to do is just add more trauma on the family that was simply trying to escape a very dangerous and a very frightening experience.”

In other words, Adams, while not scapegoating an individual in particular, makes clear that fire safety remains the responsibility of individuals in general. Thus the mayor, along with the lineup of Democratic officials who joined him Sunday and Monday in the Bronx, show that they will do nothing to address the underlying issues that make fires like the Twin Parks inferno an inevitability.

The fact is that hazardous conditions prevail in working-class housing across the city. Just four months ago, the remnants of Hurricane Ida turned basement apartments into death traps, killing 11 in their homes.

Beyond the headline tragedies, the day-to-day housing conditions for the working class are appalling. Overcrowding is rampant, while many deal with a myriad of unhealthy and unsafe issues ranging from lack of reliable heat to mold and rodent infestations. The cost of even substandard housing is increasingly impossible to afford, with rents once again skyrocketing across the five boroughs.

Twin Parks was built in 1972, and touted as an example of innovative and affordable housing for the working class and the working poor. Within three years, however, the city was virtually bankrupt. Austerity policies led to the growth of poverty. In the following decades, public spending on housing and all social spending was cut to the bone, while one speculative boom after another led to fortunes on Wall Street.

Adams began his mayoralty with a number of press appearances at which he bragged about his aggressiveness and “swagger.” The Twin Parks disaster symbolizes the reality of social conditions in New York City, however, which no amount of “swagger” can disguise.



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