

Thousands attend mass funeral for Bronx fire victims

Our reporters
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Thousands gathered in the Bronx Sunday to mourn the victims of New York's deadliest residential fire in more than three decades. A mass funeral was held for 15 of the 17 victims at the Islamic Cultural Center, about a mile and a half from the scene of the devastating fire.

The funeral drew large numbers of immigrants from across West Africa, some traveling from as far as Ohio to attend the service. Most of the victims of the fire that sent deadly smoke throughout the 19-story high-rise had family connections to the Gambia.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with mourners Sunday. Muhammed, a cousin of the youngest victim, described how his family is grappling with the tragedy of the two-year-old. "Just grief. It's really, really hard," he said as he displayed a screenshot of the toddler's death certificate on his phone.

"I'm always there. I was there that day. I went to pick up my cousin at 8:29 that morning. The fire broke out sometime around 11." Muhammed explained that his cousin's family lived on the third floor, the same floor where the fire began. His cousin, who works two jobs, often relies on friends or relatives in the building for child care. At the time of the fire, the toddler was with a friend on the 19th floor. "Most escaped, but the youngest one passed away. It's really hard. I wish it never happened."

"But it never would have happened if they had just provided heat," he said. "They do have heat in the building, but it was never enough. I bought a space heater for my cousin on the 29th," he said, scrolling on his phone to a receipt from eBay in December.

"They put them up in a hotel on Webster Avenue and said they would provide housing. But they can never return to that apartment. All the doors were sealed."

Ibrema, who came to the funeral with Muhammed,

stressed the role of building owners in allowing dangerous conditions: "Every building around, the landlords don't want to turn on the heat. I live close by to the fire. That's the reason people are using space heaters. They don't fix the heat. They don't fix broken windows, where the cold comes in from."

He described conditions in his own one-bedroom apartment, which he shares with a family of five. "Two of my kids, a 13- and a 21-year-old, sleep in the living room," he said. "The bathroom ceiling has mold and massive cracks. It already collapsed once. It's dangerous, but they won't fix it."

"I've applied for housing lottery for three years but never heard back," he added.

Yusef, a carpenter who lives on Montgomery Avenue, walking distance from the fire, told the WSWWS, "Those deaths, it is not supposed to happen that way. It is sad. A lot of people lost their family. I am also from West Africa, Ghana. When something bad like this happens, they have to fix it. The politicians come here to say something, but things have to be different."

Rafi Ismail from the Morris Park area of the Bronx, who sells cars, said that like everyone else, he came in sympathy for the families. "I am hoping that what will come out of this is for the best. The city has to see that every building is protected, but the door closer did not work, and there was no fire system. Most of them don't care about the working class."

Daloutah, who studies radiology at Bronx Community College, was at the funeral ceremony with his brother. "I live in the area," he said. "The problem is sometimes the building heat is not on, so people try to get more heat and that causes the accident. Like in my building, sometimes they turn on the heat and then turn it off after 15 minutes, but it is freezing

temperatures outside. The landlords turn off the gas because they want to save the money of buying the gas. The government is supposed to go after them, but it is the same BS. If they know the building has violations, they should fix it. It is a business. The rich getting more rich and the poor still getting more poor. They are getting billions and billions.”

WSWS reporters also spoke to residents outside the fire-damaged Twin Parks North West Sunday, where fire investigation crews were still on the scene.

Shelly Matthews, who lives next door, said, “It’s the slum landlords. They live in luxury upstate, or in Connecticut, or in New Jersey, while tenants are suffering. This should have never happened.”

Shelly went on to describe a list of unsanitary and dangerous conditions that residents of the neighborhood face. “We didn’t have heat, no hot water last night. I put on my oven. What else could I do?” She said the windows are bolted shut in the lobby. There’s a lot of residue piled up on the radiators.

The building next to hers is worse. “They have a lot of issues,” she said. “No heat. No hot water. A pregnant neighbor had no refrigerator for a month,” she said. “One of the biggest problems now is that we are infested with rats. Some people said they run into their apartments.”

Yahia Williams, a day care teacher, lives in the apartment building directly across the street from the building where the 17 fire victims died. “It was an accident, but there should be accountability. Hopefully, Mayor Adams will not blame the tenants. How come the door did not close? When a house catches on fire, people jump into action, and so should the city. But it is always the same. You call 311, the city helpline, and sometimes they get it and sometimes not, especially in low-income neighborhoods. People complain and complain, put some pressure on and then eventually they do something, but just put a Band-Aid on the problem, and then it continues, just a cycle.”

Asked about the deaths in the pandemic, Yahia replied, “The fire is like the pandemic. It was foreseeable in 2019 when it was still in another country. They should have tried to see it doesn’t happen here. When you see the problem, you need to act fast.”

Sunday’s services in the Bronx were attended by prominent Democratic officials, including Senator

Chuck Schumer, Mayor Eric Adams, and New York Attorney General Letitia James, who were afforded front-row seats for the proceedings. Addressing them, the leader of the Islamic Cultural Center, Sheikh Musa Drammeh, remarked, “If these people lived in Midtown Manhattan, this wouldn’t have happened. They would not have needed space heaters. The conditions in which they lived in the Bronx caused their death,” he said. “Mr. Mayor, you heard? Mr. Schumer, you heard?”

Mayor Adams, who had named as an adviser on housing issues one of the landlords responsible for the deadly conditions at Twin Parks North West, responded by pledging support for the families. “What is happening here in the Bronx, it is what is happening across our city, where the communities with black, brown, and immigrant people are,” he added. “It’s time to end those inequalities, so we don’t have our babies and our families torn apart by tragedy.”

The mayor’s appeal to racial politics is cynical and false. No black and brown millionaires live in slum conditions, while millions of white working people do. His empty promises to end inequality are belied by the reality of the policies of the Democratic Party. Just two days previously, the state ended the moratorium on evictions, empowering landlords to threaten impoverished tenants with homelessness even as more than 500 a week die in New York City from the pandemic.



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