

Fatal housefire in Pontiac, Michigan, highlights poverty in former GM manufacturing center

Brady Guy, Jerry White
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Two people died in a horrific house fire in Pontiac, Michigan, in the early morning hours of January 17. Eleven people were reportedly in the two-story wooden structure, which was completely engulfed in flames by the time firefighters from the neighboring suburb of Waterford arrived on the scene. While several residents were able to escape, two of the residents, including one who is believed to be a 19-year-old autistic boy, perished in the blaze.

The fire was called in at 2:44 a.m. for the home on the 800 block of St. Clair Street in Pontiac, an economically devastated former manufacturing center for General Motors, located 25 miles north of Detroit.

Firefighters found one body in a second-floor bedroom. A second was found on the first floor in the kitchen. Two men in their 60s were taken to the hospital for smoke inhalation, and a 58-year-old man suffered a broken leg.

Authorities have not released the names of the victims or the cause of the fire, which is still under investigation. The *World Socialist Web Site* has made inquiries with the Waterford Regional Fire Department and the Oakland County Medical Examiner's Office and is still awaiting information.

Residents of the burning home had to jump from the windows to survive. "I could feel the heat. I was like, 'No way I'm going through that—I gotta jump out the window,'" Lebron Tyler told WDIV reporters. "I thought it was over because when I did try to jump my leg got caught. I don't know how I made it, but I just made it," Tyler said.

Timothy Minor said he and others survived only because of the help from neighbors. "It was terrifying 'cause I didn't know if I was going to live or die," he told local reporters.

Lachen Herring, who lives next door, said she called 911 and helped people jump from the second floor of the burning home. "I was at the second window at the back. I had to take the shopping cart and break his fall on there, and then another guy had his leg out the window, and another guy was trying to climb down the bricks," Herring told WDIV

reporters.

A 36-year-old man told sheriff's deputies he jumped from a second-story window and urged his 19-year-old stepson, who is autistic, to follow him. But the young man did not and disappeared back into the burning house.

"I wish I could have done more," said Herring, whose own home was damaged by the flames. "It was horrifying listening to them, and you don't know what to do."

It is believed the home was a boarding house for recent parolees. The Michigan Department of Corrections told local news stations that the home was not contracted or paid for by their department and that the parolees paid to stay there on their own. A "rickety old staircase" had been recently removed because it was dangerous, according to one of the tenants.

While the cause of the fire is still unknown, it is common for residents in poorly insulated and heated homes to use space heaters or other potentially dangerous heating sources to keep from freezing. Temperatures in Pontiac in the early morning hours of January 17 hit a low of 19 degrees Fahrenheit.

Seventeen people died, including eight children, in the Bronx, New York, apartment house fire on January 9, which was caused by an electric space heater. Doors on the apartment and in the staircase, which were supposed to automatically close, failed to operate, spreading deadly smoke throughout the 19-story apartment building. On January 5, 13 people, including seven children perished in a Philadelphia row house fire, where none of the smoke alarms were functioning.

As of January 19, 2022, there have been 13 deaths in nine fires in Michigan, according to the Michigan Fire Inspectors Society, a substantial increase in the number of fires (up 80 percent) and deaths (up 117 percent) from this time last year. Twenty-three percent of the fires were attributable to heating sources, 11 percent to cooking and 39 percent to smoking.

Between 2017 and 2021, 212 people died in 282 fires in

Detroit and in Wayne, Macomb and Oakland counties; the latter includes Pontiac. Twenty-nine percent of the victims in the tri-county area were disabled, and 60 percent of the homes did not have operating smoke alarms.

It is no surprise that Pontiac, which has been devastated by decades of factory closures and poverty, is contributing victims to this Winter of Death. More than a third of the city's residents, 34.1 percent—live below the official poverty rate, or more than double the state's average of 15.6 percent. In addition, nearly half the city's schoolchildren—45.8 percent—come from impoverished families.

The city of 59,000 residents (down from 85,000 in 1970) was once a major manufacturing center for General Motors and is the namesake of its Pontiac brand. Like nearby Flint, Saginaw, Detroit and other GM manufacturing centers along Michigan's I-75 highway, tens of thousands of workers, black, white and Hispanic, came to Pontiac to join the ranks of the auto workforce, attracted by the relatively high living standards won by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. In 1976, Pontiac was awarded the banner of "All American City" and boasted about its high rate of home ownership and quality school system.

Since the 1980s, GM has shut at least five major factories in the city, including the Fiero (1988), Pontiac West (1994) and Pontiac East (2009) assembly plants. The fatal house fire occurred a short distance from what remains of GM's Pontiac Stamping Plant. The facility has been incorporated into the Pontiac Metal Center, which only employs 191 production workers.

Pontiac Truck & Bus, formerly known as Pontiac East, was closed as part of the Obama administration's 2009 restructuring of GM, which shuttered 14 plants—including at least six in Michigan—and eliminating 21,000 of the company's remaining 62,000 hourly jobs by the end of next year. The UAW collaborated with the Democratic administration in the gutting of jobs and agreed to slashing the wages of new workers by half.

After making billions in profits from workers, GM, once the largest taxpayer in Pontiac, left the city virtually bankrupt. In September 2011, Republican Governor Rick Snyder appointed an Emergency Finance Manager (EFM) to oversee the city's public spending and ensure the repayment of millions in debt to the banks and private investors. Under the state's recently passed PA 4 law, Emergency Financial Manager Louis Schimmel had the power to conduct layoffs, cut wages and abolish existing contracts without oversight of the city council.

Similar EFMs were appointed in other automotive cities throughout the state, including Detroit and Flint, where the financial restructuring and payoffs to investors were key to the lead poisoning of the city's water supply. In every case,

financial managers slashed public services to push the loss that had been made following the 2008-09 financial crash onto the working class of those cities.

In a widely unpopular move, Schimmel dissolved the Pontiac Fire Department and moved a fraction of its workers to Waterford, downgrading their pay and benefits. Since then, the single department has been struggling to keep up with demand. In 1984 there was a team of 123 active Pontiac firefighters. By 2011, there were only 57 before it merged with the Waterford Fire Department.

The plan put 42 of the 57 remaining Pontiac firefighters under Waterford's payroll, reducing them to new-hire status with accordingly lower wages and benefits. Firefighters packed a December 13, 2011, Board of Trustees meeting in Waterford Township to protest the deal. According to a report in the WSWS, Charli Yarbrow, a retired Pontiac firefighter, denounced the move, telling the trustees, "You guys are totally doing an injustice to the citizens of Waterford. You are totally doing an injustice to us because you will not be able to provide fire service in a timely fashion for the city of Pontiac."

"People are going to die," she stressed, emphasizing the reduced manning at Pontiac stations to 12 total firefighters a night. "Maybe you don't care. Maybe all you are thinking about is the bottom line, the money and the budget. But there is no way you should approve this budget tonight."

High rates of poverty and the drive by current Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer to keep the factories and schools open, even as the pandemic rages throughout the state, has contributed to the devastatingly high number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in Michigan. Last week, the state passed the COVID-19 death toll of 30,000, and its current number of record fatalities, 31,466, is roughly the same as all of Canada or Malaysia.

This has not stopped GM and the other auto manufacturers from making booming profits. While it is not due to release its full-year earnings until February 1, GM has told investors it expects to make \$14 billion in profits in 2021.



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