

Four killed in Bronx house fire

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A house fire early on Sunday morning, October 30, in the New York City borough of the Bronx killed four—a 10-month-old baby girl, Barah Saleh, her 22-year-old father, Ahmed Saleh, and his two younger brothers, Kalheed Waleed Ban Saleh, aged 10 and Mohamed Waleed Ahmed aged 12. Two others were injured—a 21-year-old woman and a 41-year-old man, both hospitalized in critical condition. News accounts report that, according to a neighbor, the father of the 22 year old and his two younger brothers and grandfather of the infant girl desperately tried to rescue them, but to no avail.

The fire reportedly began at about 6 a.m. on the second floor of the two-story brick house. Initial responders reportedly arrived in a little over four minutes after the initial alarm, but the fire was already extensive. The fire was described as “heavy,” going to a second alarm and ultimately requiring a total of more than 100 firefighters and Emergency Medical Service (EMS) personnel from 25 units in the response. It took nearly two hours to bring the fire under control. The New York Fire Department (FDNY) reported that several firefighters suffered minor injuries.

New York’s Democratic Mayor Eric Adams visited the scene later that day, offering a few platitudes that “The block and the community is going to rally around this family.” He said that the city would help with the burials. His own policies and those of his Democratic predecessor have significantly weakened fire safety enforcement in the city, while the dramatic rise in the cost of rent has driven families into unsafe accommodations.

The cause of this latest tragedy is still under investigation as of this writing. However, investigators have reportedly concluded that it was not intentionally set and that functional smoke alarms were present inside the house. Late reports suggest that the source may have been faulty wiring.

Although the building was registered as a single family dwelling, according to city records, investigators have found a separate basement apartment. The critical lack of affordable housing for the working class has forced many to modify their living space to accommodate larger numbers of residents than their building’s original design. The resulting overcrowding creates dangerous conditions especially under the continuing pandemic.

Whatever the immediate cause, this deadly incident is just one of numerous such tragedies the origins of which lie in poverty and overcrowding in working class neighborhoods. It is far from the first time such devastation has hit residents of the city’s poorest neighborhoods.

Last January, an apartment building fire, caused by landlord negligence, killed 17 people, nearly all of whom were immigrants from West Africa. Despite that and many other such tragedies, the *New York Times* reported only a few weeks ago that criminal prosecutions by the city of fire safety violations have dropped by 98 percent since the beginning of the pandemic.

In September 2020, fire inspectors were instructed “to pursue lesser, civil charges in many cases, so that they could be quickly processed in an administrative court that remained open during the pandemic.” In effect, this has allowed criminal negligence on the part of wealthy landlords to go with only a slap on the wrist, resulting in violations remaining unaddressed for years.

Such tragedies are not restricted to buildings owned by private landlords. In May 2019, a fire in public housing for low-income residents owned by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) in Harlem, northern Manhattan, killed six people. The building had failed a safety inspection over two years prior. In December 2017, an apartment building fire in the Bronx killed 12 and critically injured 4 others. Again,

safety violations had been reported in previous years. Residents were mostly working class immigrants from West Africa, the West Indies and Latin America.

Mayor Adams, a Democrat, who assumed office at the beginning of this year, has continued the policy of using civil rather than criminal prosecutions in such cases, which was initiated under his predecessor, Bill de Blasio, also a Democrat. In March, Adams signed an executive order that supposedly enhanced fire safety enforcement. It has had little effect. So far this year, only a bit more than 200 criminal cases have been filed as compared to approximately 9,800 in the decade prior to the pandemic. Between July 2021 and July 2022, fire-related deaths totaled 92, which was the highest in four years. The number of fires classified as serious has also risen.

In case after case, not only in New York but across the country, the root cause of so-called “accidental” deaths is the conditions of poverty and the critical lack of affordable housing produced by the capitalist system. These conditions have been greatly exacerbated by the pandemic, years of wage stagnation and now skyrocketing inflation. With the temporary eviction moratorium along with virtually all other pandemic protections removed, the housing crisis will accelerate drastically, resulting in increasing overcrowding and the ensuing dangers, including the risk of fire.



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