

Fire in Chinatown electric-bike shop leaves 4 dead, highlighting the immense social crisis in New York City

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A devastating fire in New York City's Chinatown neighborhood Tuesday morning claimed the lives of four people and injured nine more, with two presently hospitalized in critical condition. The blaze started in an electronic-bike service shop around 12:15 a.m. and quickly spread to the rest of the six-story building. It took over two hours for dozens of firefighters to extinguish the blaze.

The property, like many buildings in New York City, was a "mixed-use" building. The e-bike shop was located on the ground floor with residential floors above it. Approximately eight households, comprising 23 adults and two children, were impacted by the fire, according to the New York Red Cross, which is providing them with emergency housing.

As of this writing, the immediate cause of the fire is still under investigation by the New York Fire Department (FDNY). However, it is widely assumed that the blaze resulted from a lithium-ion battery explosion.

Lithium-ion batteries are used to power e-bikes and scooters, among various other common electronics, and are currently the leading cause of fire deaths in the city, according to fire officials. These batteries, if not properly manufactured and handled, can fail to regulate the energy contained within and quite suddenly burst into flame, releasing toxic gas.

So far this year, there have been over 100 fires caused by e-bike batteries and 13 deaths in New York City. This number has increased significantly over the last three years as e-bikes have become more commonly used in the city, largely by food delivery workers, after being legalized in 2020.

The media coverage of the fire is, as always, characterized by a complete lack of any serious effort to explain the socio-economic roots of this most recent disaster. The owner of the e-bike shop, fined over \$1,000 last year after being summoned by the FDNY for charging and storing large numbers of uncertified lithium-ion batteries, is solely blamed. What is covered over is the fact that this tragedy once again points to the immense social crisis engulfing

New York City.

New York City, the home of Wall Street, is one of the most unequal cities in the US and the world. In 2022, over 100 billionaires, the largest number of any city internationally, hoarding trillions of dollars in combined personal wealth, called the city home. On Billionaires' Row in Manhattan, luxury apartments, sitting hundreds of feet above the streets, are sold for tens of millions of dollars.

Meanwhile, one in five New Yorkers lives in poverty, and nearly half of the city's households are considered poor. Workers are increasingly being priced out the city or forced into homelessness. According to a recent report issued by the Fund for the City of New York, a household income of \$100,000 is required for a decent standard of living in New York. While "only" 16 percent of the city's population falls below the official poverty line, in reality 50 percent fall below the level of an adequate standard of living. This is well over 1 million families.

While the top 1 percent live like aristocrats, and the next 9 percent, tied at the hip to the corporate and financial oligarchs, enjoy all the luxuries of life, millions of workers and their families must resort to skipping meals, avoiding critical medical care and forgoing other basic necessities in order to live.

Those workers who are able to remain in one of New York's five boroughs face miserable and unsafe housing conditions. Mirroring the brutal conditions in the tenements at the beginning of the last century, workers and their families are confronted with mold, unsafe water, lead paint, asbestos, lack of heating, roaches, rats, and generally deteriorating and cramped housing conditions.

These horrendous conditions and violations of basic health and safety codes, the result of decades of neglect by landlords and building owners and austerity measures implemented by Democrats and Republicans, have fostered the spread of diseases and the regular eruption of fires. In January of 2022, in the worst fire disaster in New York City

in several decades, 17 people were killed in a fire in a Bronx apartment building, which had numerous building code violations and outstanding complaints from tenants.

The ruling class has allowed the COVID-19 virus to run rampant internationally, killing and debilitating tens of millions of people. In New York, the epicenter of the pandemic in 2020, tens of thousands of people have officially died from the virus, millions have been infected and countless more are suffering from Long COVID. Terrible housing conditions contributed to the spread of the virus, which had a particularly devastating impact on working class neighborhoods.

The specific conditions of the property destroyed in Tuesday's fire are not yet known. The fact that the fire was able to spread throughout the whole building with such rapidity, killing four people, raises serious questions. However, a clearer picture develops from just a brief examination of the neighborhood in which it occurred.

New York's Chinatown is located in Manhattan's Lower East Side. According to data collected by New York University's Furman Center, in 2021, over 56.8 percent of Lower East Side/Chinatown residents maintained a household income of less than \$60,000 per year. Real median gross rent in 2021 was \$1,250. In 2021, 24 percent of renter households in Lower East Side/Chinatown were severely rent-burdened, spending more than 50 percent of household income on rent.

E-bike shops largely service food delivery workers, one of the most exploited and impoverished sections of the working class. Working 10-12 hours or more per day in every kind of weather for miserable pay, these workers, largely unable to afford cars or motorbikes, use e-bikes or scooters to deliver food and groceries. There are around 80,000 people in New York City working as independent food delivery workers, largely Latin American immigrants. This section of workers has grown significantly over the last several years as online delivery services have expanded since the start of the pandemic. E-bike shops offer various critical services to these workers, repairing bikes, charging batteries and leasing and selling bikes and scooters.

According to K.M. Abraham, an expert on lithium-ion batteries and a research professor at the Northeastern University center for Renewable Energy Technologies who was interviewed by *Slate* magazine, the uncertified batteries most likely to cause fires are those largely used by delivery workers.

Using thin instead of thick separators inside the battery to keep the negative and positive electrodes from touching, these batteries are able to store more energy. This is optimal for delivery workers who travel up to 100 miles per day and work over 10 hours straight. However, thinner separators

inside the battery wear out more quickly, which increases the chance of electrodes touching, producing an explosion. Certified lithium-ion e-bike batteries, containing thick separators, only provide around three hours of driving time with less power.

Democratic Mayor Eric Adams and the Democratic Party-controlled New York City Council have recently passed legislation cracking down on uncertified lithium-ion batteries for e-bikes and scooters. However, the measures taken do nothing to ensure the safety and improvement of conditions for delivery workers. Instead workers, who are forced to use unsafe uncertified batteries and are caught, face hefty fines. The Democratic Party in New York has played an instrumental role in creating the social and economic crisis that fundamentally causes these disasters.

As the American ruling class, through its two political parties, has carried out an all-out war on the living standards and working conditions of the working class over the last 40 years, workers have been driven into increasingly dangerous living and working conditions. The large number of batteries and bikes stored in the Chinatown e-bike shop speaks to the social and economic conditions of large swaths of the population in New York who are forced to sit atop and/or handle small time bombs to survive.

Overall, more than 2,263 people died in home fires across the US in 2022, including 267 children under the age of 15. Thousands have already died this year from preventable fires and other disasters internationally, and many more will perish unless the profit system is eliminated by the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the working class.



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