

Death and capitalism: The Johannesburg fire and the case for expropriation

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The deadly fire in Marshalltown, Johannesburg is a horrific social crime triggered by the deplorable conditions confronting billions of people around the world. Seventy-four people have been confirmed dead in the fire, including 12 children and infants as young as one year old. Residents who survived the inferno say many of the deceased were trapped inside by a locked iron gate, while others died attempting to jump to safety.

The *New York Times* interviewed survivors of the fire and wrote, “Residents and city officials described a building that was a firetrap. There were no fire exits or sprinklers. Rooms were subdivided with cardboard and sheets, and some residents lived in dozens of tin shacks constructed inside the building in an open space on the ground floor.”

The building was reportedly run by gangs, with water and electricity provided “through illegal connections.” One 26-year-old worker told the *Times* he paid \$32 a month in rent out of a salary of \$107 to live in the building. Residents largely consisted of immigrants moving to the city from rural South Africa, as well as impoverished Malawi, with others migrating from Zimbabwe and Tanzania.

With the end of the racist apartheid regime in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) came to power pledging to resolve the country’s longstanding housing crisis, with Nelson Mandela declaring the right to housing an “unbreakable promise.”

That promise has been broken. Today, the government estimates that 12.5 million people remain inadequately housed, and this is likely a massive underestimation. A 2017 government survey found that almost 15 percent of the country and 20 percent of residents of Gauteng province (where Johannesburg is located) live in informal housing, including sheet metal

lean-tos common in the country’s 2,700 shantytowns.

The Center for Affordable Housing Finance in Africa (CAHF) said in a 2019 report that the ANC’s public housing initiative “is clearly insufficient to meet demand.” The outcome of 30 years of ANC rule is epitomized in the fact that President Cyril Ramaphosa is worth \$500 million, while the ANC government oversees conditions like those that prevail in Marshalltown.

The conditions giving rise to such disasters and the indifference of the officials are fundamentally the same in the world’s imperialist centers, which have looted Africa’s vast natural resources for centuries. In June 2017, 72 people died in the Grenfell Tower fire because the British government allowed apartment buildings in London to be built with cheap, flammable cladding that regulators knew was dangerous. In June 2021, 98 people died when a condominium collapsed in Surfside, Florida, in the Miami area, as a result of cost-cutting and a lack of building regulations.

In each instance, the criminal loss of life could have been prevented had the authorities directed even the slightest attention or resources toward the most basic needs of the world’s population. The ultimate responsibility for such deadly incidents lies in the hands of a parasitic ruling class that is strangling society and blocking the development of the human race.

How many of the hundreds of thousands of people who died in the Turkish and Syrian earthquakes this February could have been saved had the authorities allocated the resources required to ensure that buildings constructed on fault lines were safe to inhabit? How many of the 115 who were killed in the August fires that swept across Maui could have escaped if authorities had bothered to place a proper warning

system in place? This year alone, train crashes in Greece and India killed 57 and 300 people, respectively, due to cuts to public infrastructure demanded by the banks and corporations.

The most staggering example of the ruling class's indifference to the loss of human life is the coronavirus pandemic, which the governments have allowed to spread unabated rather than implement health restrictions that might impact corporate profits. As a result, the pandemic has caused upwards of 20 million excess deaths, and new variants continue to spread around the world.

This raises the urgent need for taking control of society's wealth and directing it immediately toward human need. Society can no longer afford the rich. Just over 250 billionaires have more wealth than the poorest 1 billion people. In 2021 alone, the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans netted an additional \$6.5 *trillion* on top of what they already had—more than enough to provide the world's entire population with access to adequate housing, food, healthcare and education.

Capitalism's death march must be stopped in its tracks. The banks and major industries must be expropriated and placed under the democratic control of the working class, to be run for human need and not private profit. The vaults of the rich must be opened, and trillions in hoarded wealth put to public use. Mankind's immense technological abilities must be harnessed not for war and profit but to provide critical services and information to the global working class, to facilitate the safe and free migration of peoples according to need and to reverse the impact of climate change.

Placing the world's resources at the disposal of the population is an urgent necessity. A January 2022 Oxfam report titled "Inequality Kills" attempted to quantify the number of people who die due to income and wealth inequality each year. The report concluded: "Every day inequality contributes to the deaths of at least 21,000 people. That's one person every four seconds." This, Oxfam said, was a "conservative estimate."

The totals are unfathomable. Every year, despite the technological breakthroughs of the 21st century, 5.6 million people die due to lack of healthcare. Over 2 million die each year from starvation, and this figure will increase dramatically as a result of the US-NATO

war against Russia, which has driven up food prices and threatens the world with nuclear catastrophe. Oxfam estimates that by 2030, 230,000 more people will die each year due to heatwaves, floods and storms intensified by climate change.

All over the world, strikes and protests against inequality have developed as opposition grows to the intolerable conditions workers face. From the Arab Spring to the wave of mass protests of 2019-2021, the world working class has demonstrated time and time again its willingness to sacrifice in the struggle for equality. The list of countries with the most mass protests in the last year gives a sense of the objective international unity of the working class. With rising inflation and the growing cost of living, masses of workers are being driven into struggle.

What is required is revolutionary leadership. The working class must become conscious of its immense revolutionary power. Storming the commanding heights of the world economy and expropriating the expropriators requires more than militancy. It requires a political struggle, the struggle for socialism. Such a movement, armed with the lessons of the past and unified across race and nationality, can unlock society's resources, abolish poverty and want, and open up a new period in the history of man.



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