Bronx apartment building fire exemplifies the crisis in working class housing

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Early on Friday morning, a major fire engulfed the top floor of a six-story apartment building in the New York City borough of the Bronx. At least eight people were injured, mostly from smoke inhalation, and all of the approximately 200 residents were driven from their homes, according to the city Fire Department.

The fire was first reported shortly before 2 a.m. and quickly grew to five alarms, the highest level of response, involving a total of approximately 250 firefighters and emergency medical personnel. It was not finally extinguished until midday. Heavy winds hampered the struggle to put out the blaze. This was compounded by sub-freezing temperatures that quickly turned the water used to fight the fire into sheets of ice. Five of the injured were firefighters.

One resident told the *New York Times* that he had heard no fire alarm but had been alerted to the danger by the sound of breaking glass and people running and screaming.

Robert S. Tucker, the city's fire commissioner, stated at a news conference that given the severity of the blaze, it was a miracle that there were no deaths or serious injuries.

The building, known as the Mayfair Apartments, is located on Wallace Avenue. Built in 1931, the building had 98 rental units. Although the fire was confined to the top floor and roof, the entire building was rendered uninhabitable. Residents were forced onto the frigid street in their night clothes.

Temporary shelter was established by the Red Cross at a nearby school and at least 66 families, including 188 people, have registered for assistance. Given the extremely limited availability of affordable housing in the city, the displaced residents will have great difficulty finding new places to live. Many may be forced to join the city's already huge homeless population, estimated at more than 350,000.

The cause of the fire has not yet officially been determined. However, residents reported that the building had been without heat for several days, during which time the city experienced sub-freezing night-time temperatures, forcing people to use portable heaters and other measures to keep warm. Over the past three years, a total of 239 complaints regarding lack of heat and hot water, at least 11 so far in January alone, have been reported by tenants to the city via its 311 complaints line. Residents also told of problems with the electrical system.

In a statement that exemplified the official arrogance and indifference to the appalling conditions suffered by the working class tenants, the city's fire commissioner stated that portable heaters should not be used when apartments lack heat. "Obviously, that's a very dangerous situation," he said. "It can cause fires to happen, and we hope that we are sending the message that fire safety in the cold weather is super important, and to report any situations like that to 3-1-1 immediately."

The fact that tenants have been doing so for months with no action by the city seems to have escaped the commissioner's notice.

The building has a history of poor maintenance. The NYC Department of Buildings (DOB) has recorded 61 complaints regarding the building and issued a stop work order in 2019 due to debris falling from the façade. The landlord, Parkash Management, has refused to comment on the latest incident, citing the active fire investigation.

This is not an isolated incident. In New York, the real estate interests operate with impunity. A decade ago, then-Public Advocate Letitia James named the company's owner, Ved Parkash, the city's "worst landlord" for gross neglect of his properties. At the time, Parkash, who owned 60 buildings, which had accumulated more than 4,000 serious violations, had received millions of dollars in federal subsidies and state tax breaks. Clearly, nothing has been done in the interim to improve conditions.

Parkash currently owns or co-owns 72 buildings in the

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Bronx and Queens, for which numerous complaints regarding lack of heat and hot water, among other problems, have been reported. At one property alone, 592 such complaints have been filed in the past three years. Currently, Parkash is subject to 16 active lawsuits in the Bronx and Queens Supreme Courts.

The latest fire brings to mind the Twin Parks fire three years ago in the Bronx, also reportedly caused by a space heater, which caused 17 deaths. Owned by a different set of investors, the building also had a long history of violations which were not addressed, including the failure of automatic fire doors to close, which allowed smoke to spread, suffocating 17 residents to death, including nine children. At least 63 others were injured.

New York City epitomizes the stark level of social and economic inequality in the United States. The Bronx, one of the five boroughs of New York City and a county in New York state, has a predominantly working class population, with the lowest per capita income of any county in the state. By contrast, New York County, New York City's borough of Manhattan, which is home to Wall Street, has a per capita income more than six times greater.

One consequence of this glaring disparity is the abysmal quality of working class housing exemplified by the poor maintenance of privately owned apartment buildings in which workers and their families are forced to live, while the city government does little or nothing to address the mountain of complaints, resulting in destitution and death for the residents.

The lack of decent, affordable and safe housing is not confined to New York City, as testified to by the millions of homeless people across the country. It is the product of extreme economic inequality caused by a decaying capitalist system in escalating crisis.

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