

Devastating fire at off-campus University of Massachusetts housing complex displaces 232 residents

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A devastating fire Friday night, November 7, burned down Olympia Place, a large off-campus housing complex mainly used by students from the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass Amherst). Although there were no injuries, more than 200 residents lost their homes and everything inside when a nearby construction site at 47 Olympia Drive caught fire.

Following multiple explosions that likely came from fuel tanks at the construction site, where a new four-story private dorm building was being erected, the blaze spread to the occupied Olympia Place residential building at 57 Olympia Drive, just feet away. A construction crane at the site collapsed during the fire, adding an additional element of danger.

The fire, whose initial cause is still under investigation but deemed not suspicious, began around 8:15 p.m. Friday and spread to the residential complex within 30 minutes. It took over a million gallons of water to extinguish, after burning for over 24 hours. Amherst was forced to declare a state of emergency due to the loss to the town's water reserves. The explosion of fuel tanks and the collapse of a construction crane point to the danger of carrying out construction so close to the residential complex.

The Amherst Fire Department called the blaze "one of the largest fires our community has seen." In a social media post, the department said, "Despite being understaffed and stretched thin, [firefighters'] dedication and teamwork prevented what could have been a devastating loss of life."

The Amherst Fire Department requested mutual aid, with departments from surrounding towns in Hampshire, Hampden, Franklin, Worcester and Berkshire counties joining the Amherst firefighters at the scene of the fire with personnel and equipment. Faced with poor water pressure in the area, the firefighters had to rely on mobile

water tankers. By Saturday, Olympia Place was deemed a total loss and was demolished so that fire crews could reach areas that were still burning.

The fire wasn't fully contained until Sunday. The Town of Amherst declared a state of emergency Saturday night to access state and federal emergency funds and asked residents to cease all nonessential water use. At 5 p.m. Sunday, November 9, Town Manager Paul Bockelman ended the state of emergency after the town's water supply recovered.

The fire left 232 residents at Olympia Place deprived of their homes and struggling to find places to stay while faced with the loss of personal belongings, including computers, clothing and important documents, during the rushed evacuation of the now demolished building. Lauren Dworkin, a junior at UMass, told the *Boston Globe*, "Everything I had was in that room ... It's been hard to accept it's just all suddenly gone." NBC News quoted an unnamed student who said, "It's sad because all of my stuff was inside and it was just me and my roommate, who are like, really close, so all our college life is in there."

Town Manager Paul Bockelman told the *Globe*, "If they had a passport or visa, if they had a laptop or a cherished violin or musical instrument, that was all lost in the fire. They lost everything." UMass has tried to find temporary housing for the displaced students, but many students spent the initial days after the fire on friends' couches or even at hotels, often having to purchase essentials like clothing.

The Olympia Place fire underscores the systemic problems in the profit-driven construction industry, which remains the most dangerous industry in Massachusetts, responsible for over a third of all workplace fatalities across the state. Just last month, two workers were killed

in Everett, Massachusetts, when a crane mounted on a barge toppled over during demolition work. Serious construction hazards, such as fires, burns and explosions—frequently resulting from damaged gas and power lines—are recurrent dangers that arise from the rush to turn a profit at the expense of workers’ and others’ safety and well-being.

The contractor in charge of building the new dorms at 47 Olympia Drive, D.A. Sullivan & Sons, had a previous serious violation issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 2016. The company was fined just \$2,000 after having its initial penalty reduced. A “serious violation” issued by OSHA means that there is a substantial probability that a workplace hazard could cause an accident that would most likely result in death or serious physical harm, and that the employer knew, or should have known, of the violation. Fines levied by OSHA are typically no impediment to unsafe business practices, with even maximum fines for “serious” violations (not including “willful” or “repeat” violations) being set at no more than \$16,550.

Building private student housing is an extremely profitable enterprise. Amherst is a major college town, with demand for student housing which is not met by dorms provided directly on campus by UMass. Thousands of students are forced to find housing in the off-campus market. Property developers are in a constant rush to develop new housing. Private developers frequently use a “by-the-bed” leasing model, which is even more profitable than standard apartment rentals. Private, market-rate dorms in Amherst are particularly costly; Olympia Place rentals go for over \$1,300 a room per month. Leases are typically co-signed by parents, making the leases particularly attractive to property holders. The Olympia Place dorm and the property under construction at 47 Olympia Drive were both developed by a large regional developer, Archipelago Investments LLC, which has several multimillion-dollar buildings in Amherst.

The profit drive to build new housing for students necessarily creates unsafe conditions, with corners cut at every stage of development, construction and maintenance. This same process is evident in the continued trend of accidents and deaths at construction sites and other disasters based on poor maintenance of buildings across Massachusetts. This year, these include:

- The collapse of a large crane at the construction site in Everett on October 26 killed two workers.
- A two-story house under construction in Weymouth collapsed in January, killing one worker and injuring four

others.

- In July, a five-alarm fire ripped through the Gabriel House Assisted Living Facility in Fall River, claiming 10 residents’ lives. Maintenance at the facility was neglected and critical regulatory failures have been reported in civil lawsuits and post-fire investigations.

These are not accidents in the true sense of the word, but social disasters produced by the subordination of human safety to corporate profit. While big companies and investors are left untouched by these tragedies and continue to rake in fortunes, the working class and their communities suffer the consequences. This is, moreover, an international phenomenon, with hundreds of thousands of workers dying from industrial accidents worldwide every year.

The Trump administration represents an enormously wealthy capitalist oligarchy that can no longer tolerate even the most modest obstacles to profit. It has worked to remove federal oversight and enforcement of safety at construction sites nationwide, particularly aiming to restrict the use of the General Duty Clause (GDC). This clause enables OSHA to cite employers for serious hazards not covered by a specific rule. This gives the construction and other industries opportunities to find legal loopholes, freeing them to engage in unsafe work conditions.

Trump’s attacks also include loosening the rules on consultation with federal bodies on standards in construction, paving the way for future mass deregulation. The Trump administration has already sought to remove important standards, including the Construction Illumination Standard and halting the effort to establish a federal Heat Safety Standard, which places millions of workers in danger.



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