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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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12.01.2022

Winter of death: Two deadly housing fires in less than a week expose the reality of American capitalism

Two deadly fires in less than a week in Philadelphia and New York City have exposed the conditions that millions of workers confront in their daily lives due to the subordination of every basic social right, including housing, to the profit interests of the financial oligarchy.



Emergency personnel work at the scene of a fatal fire at an apartment building in the Bronx on Sunday, Jan. 9, 2022, in New York. (AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura)

Both fires are among the deadliest in either city's history, marking January 2022 as a grim winter of death as the COVID-19 pandemic surges to new heights across the US and

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internationally. And they were entirely preventable. For this reason, they are not just horrible tragedies and personal disasters for those involved. They are social crimes.

Early Wednesday, January 5, a fire ripped through a city-owned row house in the Fairmount neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, killing 12 people, including eight children. Investigators have suggested that the immediate cause of the fire was most likely a child playing with a lighter near a Christmas tree. The three-story home had been converted into two apartments, with 18 people crammed into one unit and eight in the other. The four battery-operated smoke detectors in the unit where the 12 people died were not working at the time of the fire.

On Sunday, January 9, an apartment fire filled the Twin Parks North West building in the Bronx borough of New York City with smoke, suffocating 17 residents to death, including nine children. At least 63 others were injured, 15 of whom were still in life-threatening critical condition Monday. Dead and suffering residents were discovered by firefighters in the stairwells as they desperately sought to escape the 15-story tower.

The fire in the Bronx is reported to have been triggered by a space heater. A broken automatic door closer meant that smoke poured out of the unit after residents fled. There was no sprinkler system in place to automatically suppress the fire or any other safety measures that would have blocked the smoke from filling the tower and choking residents to death.

In 2013 a similar fire in the Bronx killed three boys, set off by candles used to heat the apartment after utilities had been cut off. In 2017, a fire ripped through a Bronx apartment building in the Belmont neighborhood, killing 12 residents, including a one-year-old. Most of the victims were stuck on upper floors and asphyxiated as the central stairwell filled with smoke because of an open door that did not have an automatic closer.

Home to the billion-dollar Yankees baseball franchise and just a few miles from Wall Street, the Bronx is the poorest borough in New York City and is home to some of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the United States. Low-income workers, immigrant and native born, live in some of the worst housing stock in the city as they scrape by in one of the most expensive cities in the world. In the case of the Twin Parks apartments, the residents are mostly immigrants from West Africa, primarily Gambia and Burkina Faso.

In Philadelphia's Fairmount neighborhood, the growing gulf of social inequality that defines life in America is also on full display. Proudly promoted as part of the city's Art Museum Area, the median home sale price in the neighborhood has risen more than \$130,000 in five years, and the average monthly rent now exceeds \$2,200, pricing out working class residents. The demand for affordable housing in the city far outstrips what the Philadelphia Housing Authority has on offer, with more than 40,000 residents on the waiting list for publicly subsidized housing. Under these conditions, families are forced to crowd together just to be able to afford housing, creating prime conditions for deadly fires.

Rather than being treated as an essential necessity, under capitalism housing is used as yet another means for squeezing profits from the working class. Buildings like Twin Parks are traded as financial instruments by corporations and ownership groups that rely on state and federal funding to make them profitable while ignoring maintenance.

The Twin Parks complex in the Bronx was recently purchased by Camber Property Group, co-founded by millionaire landlord Eric Gropper, an adviser to Mayor Eric Adams on housing issues, in a \$166 million deal. Across the country, the nation's limited public housing stock has been deliberately underfunded and allowed to decay. Demand for affordable housing is growing, and public funding is being funneled to private property owners through Section 8 vouchers.

Housing fires and associated fatalities remain a tragically common and deadly phenomenon in the United States. According to the latest report by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), there were more than 356,000 home structure fires in 2020 resulting in 2,580 deaths and 11,500 injuries. This averages to one fire every 1.5 minutes and one death every 3.5 hours. Despite advances in the use of flame-resistant building material and safety systems, the rate of deaths per reported home fire was slightly higher in 2020 than it was 40 years ago: 7.2 for every 100,000 fires today, compared to 7.1 in 1980.

The NFPA also reports that heating equipment is the leading cause of home fires, killing an average of 500 people every year between 2014 and 2018, approximately 20 percent of all deaths. Families turn to such alternative forms of heating to make up for the lack of utilities or poor heating and insulation. The loss of utilities in the cold winter months leads

to other desperate measures, like lighting candles or turning on ovens and old fireplaces that can spark fires.

With the lifting of a patchwork of moratoriums on utility shutoffs and evictions put in place at the beginning of the pandemic, millions are being put at increased risk of residential fires. Even with the limited protections in place, one million households in 17 states had their utilities shut off as of June 2021. More than 116,000 households were cut off when Pennsylvania lifted its moratorium at the end of March 2021.

The lifting of moratoriums also puts workers at increased risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19. A working paper by the National Bureau for Economic Research in January 2021 found that if a consistent national ban on utility shutoffs had been in place from March to November 2020, infections would have been reduced by nearly 15 percent and deaths nine percent.

What is preventing everyone from living in a safe home? It is certainly not for a lack of resources. Trillions of dollars have been made on Wall Street in the first two years of the pandemic, and corporate profits smash one record after the next. The Federal Reserve has provided unlimited resources to ensure that the ruling class continues to enrich itself while millions die from COVID-19.

The fires in the Bronx and Philadelphia are the result of the homicidal indifference of the financial elite for the lives of the working class and the subordination of safety to the demands of the oligarchy. This same criminal indifference to life has resulted in more than 860,000 deaths in the US and at least 5.5 million globally from the coronavirus pandemic.

Just like the pandemic, the horrible tragedies in Philadelphia and the Bronx will not pass by the broad masses of workers without notice. But in order to hold those responsible for these crimes to account, the anger and revulsion these disasters produce must be transformed into a conscious socialist movement of the working class, fighting to expropriate the financial elite and reorganize society to meet the needs of the great mass of society and rather than the few.

World Socialist 11.01.2022