

Two die in Detroit house fire

By Lawrence Porter
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On Saturday evening an elderly brother and sister tragically died in a house fire on Detroit's west side, only blocks away from a fire station "browned out" as a result of city budget cuts.

The fire broke out around 9 p.m. on Burlingame St., one block from 12th Street, now called Rosa Parks Boulevard, in a two-family flat. Killed in the fire were Doyle Whatley, 77, and his sister Cecelia Vance, 69. Two other members of the family escaped the fire unharmed—their 84-year-old sister and a four-year-old child.

Neighbors in the closely-knit community joined the elderly sister in desperate attempts to fight the fire with a garden hose as they awaited the fire department. When the small hose turned out to be frozen, anger and frustration rose among the bystanders in the face of the massive blaze. When firefighters arrived, the two victims had already succumbed. A crowd gathered as the firefighters brought out the bodies with several family members attempting to go into the home to find out what happened.

Described by the media as a "riot", the scene was very tense. Firefighters called three times for police backup before receiving a response. Burlingame Street is just blocks from the outbreak of one of the nation's most devastating riots, the 1967 events—also known as the 12th Street riots—which were suppressed by the National Guard and claimed 43 lives.

Today the poverty and suffering in the district is actually far worse for the African-American residents than it was 45 years ago. The "browning out" of the local fire station in 2005 has only made the situation worse.

According to members of the family, the fire took place in the basement where Whatley was watching TV. Commo Berryhill, 63, a retired auto-worker who lost his aunt and uncle in the fire, told the WSWs that his mother smelled smoke in the home and alerted his

aunt Cecelia.

"I wasn't there at the time," he said, "but I was told my mother smelled the smoke coming from the basement, so my aunt went to see what was the problem. My mother didn't know what it was until my uncle said it was the TV that was on fire."

"My aunt tried to help him, but both of them got trapped because of the smoke."

Another family member, Kaisha Adams, 20, said, "My aunt went down to get him and when she opened up the doors the flames blew her back. She then tried to climb up the steps." Her aunt didn't make it, however, because she had problems with her legs.

Several firefighters confirmed that Ms. Vance was found halfway up the stairs.

The WSWs spoke to several firefighters about the fire. All of them confirmed that the station closest to the fire, Engine House 21 on Linwood, is on brownout, or closed with a minimum crew, and has been in this state since 2005.

When the WSWs asked one firefighter if the station being on brownout could have had an effect on reaching the fire in time, he said in this case he didn't think it was a factor.

"We were very lucky," said one of the firefighters. "We had a fire on Fullerton (Street) and we had just finished fighting that one about one hour to one and half hours earlier when we got the call to go to Burlingame. If we had still been at that one, I don't know what would have happened, because everybody that was at the fire on Burlingame was at the fire on Fullerton."

Another firefighter said Engine 21 was more or less closed permanently. "There are two stations that are browned out all the time, Engine 52 and Engine 42. They are rotated back and forth. Those are rotating brownouts. The other company that is closed is Engine 21. They are in effect closed. They say they are

'browned out' for the media, but really they are closed."

Instead of joining with the residents in opposing the cuts, the president of the firefighters union told the *Detroit Free Press* that firefighters were fending off unruly residents who "went after fire crews." "We're unprotected out there," stated Detroit Fire Fighters Association President Daniel McNamara, who said police had not arrived on the scene more than an hour after being called. "Public safety holds the city together," stated McNamara. "We need to be able to operate."

This angle was eagerly picked up by Fox News, which promptly described the scene as a "riot". "MI House Fire Kills 2. Injures 2, Causes Riot," reiterated Fire Engineering, a web site that reports on fire related developments.

"No, it was not a riot," stated family member Berryhill. "One or two of the guys thought the fire department should have gotten the people out of the house. There is a feeling the city is not doing enough. But they (the firefighters) were doing what they could. They were upset. I think this is being blown up for other reasons."

Neighbor Jennifer Jackson expressed the same sentiments. "There was no riot," stated Ms. Jackson, a retired teacher. "It is just that the neighborhood is family oriented and we stick together like family whether it is a wedding, funeral or something happens to someone."

"People were mourning. We were screaming and crying; that's all that it was," she continued.

Mattie Springfield, another neighbor, said people tried to get into the house because they knew the people. "They went in to try to help," she said. "They were upset and they are hurting. People were just upset. For a couple of girls, that was their grandmother's house."

Ms. Springfield said she was surprised at the response of the police. Reports state that over 100 police were on the block. "I was wondering why all the police were here. It was too many. They didn't need them."

Another neighbor said he thought it took the fire department a long time to arrive. "It seemed to me that they didn't get here in time. Family members were trying to go in. What family member wouldn't try to

get their family member out of there?"

One of the firefighters said that things did get tense and that it is a common problem. "There is so much tension in the city with the economic problems, and so forth," he said. "The tensions are so high that it doesn't take much to set somebody off, especially under conditions where a family member just passed away."

Another firefighter said they often call the police EMS (Emergency Medical Service) and "often they don't come."

Detroit Mayor Dave Bing is presently in negotiations with city unions and is demanding 1,000 job cuts and massive cuts and concessions. The City Council wants to go further, and is calling for 2,300 job cuts, including a cut of 200 firefighters.

Firefighters pointed out that there are only 460 firefighters in the city, not including fire officials. If the city cut 200 firefighters, the force would be literally cut in half, placing even more lives in jeopardy.

These policies are a guarantee that more people will die because of the lack of resources. The city, state and federal governments are cutting resources for the most vulnerable sections of the population while they increase the wealth of the rich.

One firefighter said, "I noticed that [Michigan Governor] Snyder is giving \$1.5 billion in tax breaks for the rich. I agree there needs to be a unified struggle of all working people."

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