

One hundred people killed in New York house fires this winter

By Steve Filips
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One hundred people have been killed in house fires in New York state so far this winter as cold spells and benefits cuts have forced more families into overcrowded and substandard housing.

In New York City, seven people were killed last week when their apartment building went up in flames after a 127-year-old gas line leaked, causing a tremendous explosion. Many other fires took place throughout both New York City and the state in older and overcrowded homes.

The US Fire Administration Bureau under the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has reported 58 fire victims in New York state for this winter heating season. Since October 1, 100 people have died in house fires. Many of these fires have been caused by faulty electrical equipment.

On February 15, a fast-moving fire took three young peoples' lives in New Hartford, a suburb of Utica. Emergency crews arrived at the home to find it fully engulfed in flames. They lived in a family member's three-bedroom home where a total of eight people lived. The victims of the fire were Jordan Morinitti, 3, his brother Joshua, 7, and their cousin, Jennifer Moore, 21. Jennifer was unable to escape from the basement of the home. Jennifer's 2-year-old son was carried to safety.

Firefighters made attempts to save the two boys, who were trapped in a first floor bedroom, but due to the intensity of the inferno, access through the home was blocked. An opening through the exterior wall was cut to extricate the young brothers, but despite aggressive efforts, they both perished.

Autopsies conducted by the Onondaga County medical examiner's office revealed that the all three had succumbed to smoke inhalation.

Local media reported at least eight people were inside

when a faulty electrical appliance on the first floor is believed to have ignited the Cape Cod-style home built in 1950 with natural gas-fueled central heating.

Consistent well-below freezing temperatures this winter have magnified the suffering of a large segment of the population who are vulnerable to the ongoing economic crisis. The US Census Bureau reports the poverty rate in Utica for the four years from 2008-2012 at over 30 percent.

The deadly fires across New York state in these bitter, frigid conditions affect predominantly those who rely on more dangerous alternatives to properly-maintained, safer central heating.

A significant portion of the fires have taken place in older, overcrowded buildings. The absence of affordable housing for low income people is for many a death sentence.

On January 26, a raging house fire in Hogansburg, NY near Massena and the St. Lawrence River on the Canadian border, killed a father and his two sons. The house was 70 years old and the likely cause of the blaze was faulty electrical wiring. Jarius Chrisjohns ,46, went back into the blazing home in a desperate attempt to save two of his sons, Hunter, 3, and Javin, 5 years old. Tragically, the weakened structure collapsed trapping all three. Two other family members were injured.

The January 20 Penfield fire (see: "Funeral held for eight-year old Rochester, New York boy killed in trailer fire"), where 8-year-old Tyler J. Doohan heroically went back into the burning trailer home in a failed attempt to save his trapped grandfather and step-great grandfather, has claimed another victim. Tyler's great-grandmother, Barbara Beach, perished due to injuries suffered from the fire.

On February 16, a fire in a two-family home in Johnson City near Binghamton killed James McCoy,

38, while Sarah Wenzinger, 26, perished from smoke inhalation. Fire investigators said the probable origin of the blaze was electrical. Local television station WBNG reported that four fires occurred in the area that same weekend, saying: “Bret Chellis, the Director of Broome County Emergency Services, says a common problem during the winter months is the use of alternative heating sources.”

In addition, over the last two months the electricity price from the local utility company, National Grid, has been increasing.

The ongoing cuts to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) have prevented thousands from receiving assistance. The federal LIHEAP program has cut New York state’s share of benefits by 30 percent between 2009-2012. Over the same period, the number of households requesting help has increased by 15 percent.

Large companies have been insulated from utility price hikes by large grants from state and local politicians, ostensibly to protect jobs. A recent article on the *World Socialist Web Site* exposes the expanse of the billions in tax abatements to corporations. (See: “States, cities hand out billions in tax abatements”)

The rate of fatalities and fires is nothing short of criminal—inferior housing and suffering bitter cold for the masses while billionaires gorge themselves in obscene wealth. The Obama administration continues to cut programs like food stamps and heating assistance, forcing many to make the choice between heat or other vital necessities such as food and medicines.

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