

“Multiple families have been displaced and the city and government, no one has done a damn thing for them”

Three months after Chicago house fire that killed ten children

By George Gallanis and Benjamin Mateus
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In the early morning of August 26, 2018, ten children lay sleeping in a coach house in Chicago’s working class Little Village neighborhood. On the porch of the house, according to city officials, a substance smoldered before roaring into a fire.

“Vince and I were in bed when I heard loud banging on the window,” Henry, who was sleeping with his partner in the front garden unit of the building where the children died, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“I went out to see who it was and it was a lady screaming that the building and that the building in back was on fire. So I immediately grabbed Vince but he did not believe the building was on fire. He believed that as usual the Latin Kings were knocking at our door asking for cigarettes or a lighter or some other thing which I did pretty regularly, and he would not listen to me. I almost had to push him out the door. I hooked up all three of our pitbulls and got them out the door along with him,” said Henry.

“There were ashes and smoke coming down on us. Tinder began to fall as a well so we decided to move. Then we went in front of the coffee shop which is on Marshall Boulevard and waited.”

“I woke up 15 minutes before my neighbor knocked on my window,” said Andrea, who lived directly across the alley from the coach house.

“I heard an initial bomb. Now I’m told that initial explosion was the gas line. Sounded like firecrackers. That’s when the big flames came out. I realized it was the gas line because when I was reading about the California fires, they described the gas explosion verbatim as I heard it the night of the fire.

“I saw a wall of fire. I honestly thought that our fence was on fire. You could feel it and smell it. The firefighters were there working on it. They were getting the people out. I started waking my family up and getting them ready to go. We were all gawking at the fire.

“The smoke alarms at the building next door started going off. The coach house had an alarm, but it wasn’t working. I grabbed my daughter and woke my other family members. I got my kit with important papers and got out. We were worried about our building catching fire. I was more worried about my neighbors who were closer.

“The siding of our house melted. Our fence almost caught on fire. By this time the firefighters were working on the fire and we became less worried about the fire spreading. We didn’t know at this time if anyone had died. But we became concerned if anyone got hurt. We knew there were people there.

“It was about an hour after the fire was doused that we heard that people died. I saw the firefighters carrying stretchers out. We thought it was someone. After the fire they were just trying to clear everything out. The police came about three hours later. I did an interview with the police. They thought the fire was caused by arson.”

Henry recounted, “There was no break in terms of people being around there. Firefighters everywhere. Ambulances everywhere. Corpses were carried out on stretchers. They were covered.

“We just stayed outside all night. The next day we met the Red Cross and by then the building was boarded up. I don’t remember what we did. I know we spent all night outside.

“It was such horror and confusion. I kept going around the block to see what was going on. I saw people being carried out of the building, I saw fire department people, I saw people screaming, and weeping and wailing and just total confusion.”

Eight children died the morning of the fire. Two more would die days later from sustained fire wounds. The children were Maya Almaraz, 3 months; Lonni Ayala, 3 years; Ariel Garcia, 5; Gialanni Ayala, 5; Giovanni Ayala, 10; Xavier Contreras, 11; Nathan Contreras, 13; Adrian Hernandez, 14; Cesar Contreras, 15; and Victor Mendoza, 16.

The coach house had no working fire alarms.

“I was surprised by the fire because it happened so close to me,” Andrea said. “I’m 30 and have been living here for 26 years and I’ve never had something like this ever happen to me. It was and still is pretty rough. We have to throw our garbage back in the alley [across from where the fire took place] and when it rains you can still smell the soot and ashes from the fire.

“I would see the kids playing in the back alley before the fire. We have a couple of cats they would come and play with them. My neighbor who lives in the back did actually talk with them and knew them. She is still very much affected by it. When she hears about the kids you can see the scar from that ... I think it’s called

PTSD?”

The cause of the fire has yet to be determined and city officials have ruled out electricity as the cause.

Henry explained, “I had so many electrical issues in my building. About a year ago, my lights started flickering. I told the landlord about it and he didn’t do anything. It started getting worse and worse and the lights started flickering and going off and on and one room would be lit while the other off and so forth. The current traveled through the house and the apartment and it fried my television. I lost a brand new TV. I lost a brand new sound bar. Two space heaters. I lost a microwave. A refrigerator and other things.

“I called and emailed the building department so many times. I sent them an email that said, ‘Fear of electrocution!’ because I was taking a bath and when I touched the hot water handle a charge ran through my fingers and through my arm.

He added, “66 percent of all residential fires are caused by electrical fires. I was more afraid I would get electrified. When the building did burn, my first thought was electricity. How you can immediately rule out electricity when the fire has burned the electric lines, the transformer is destroyed, the building is in such shape that it is nothing but burnt up carbon and you can go in there one hundred percent exclude electricity? That is irrational to me, absolutely irrational.”

According to one report by The Journal of the International Society for Burn Injuries, children from low-income families are far more likely to die in a residential fire than children born into families who are economically well off. In another study which looked at 3,179 patients admitted to the Shriner’s Hospital for Children in Galveston, Texas, from 1985 through 2001 revealed children from low-income families were three times more likely to die as a result of a residential fire than from higher-income families.

Poorer families will often live together to save money on rent which leads to increased fatalities during a fire. Moreover, poorer households will often rent older and rundown apartment buildings which often lack fire sprinklers and other fire protection systems and have other ailments, such as old electrical systems, which are more prone to fires.

Since the fire Henry has moved from Little Village to the South Chicago neighborhood, where the former US Steel South Works plants once operated and employed at one time 20,000 people before shuttering in 1992. He has not been able to get back into his former apartment to retrieve his belongings.

“Here in this neighborhood, twenty percent of buildings are vacant,” Henry noted. “Another twenty percent have just fallen down and turned into vacant lots. Who is going to buy in this area? Investors are going to buy in this area.”

Henry added, “Most of the buildings in Little Village, most of the buildings here in South Chicago should be gutted. I mean there’s no hope for them and as long poor people are living there the city will not make anyone fix anything because they don’t care. The city only makes people fix things when the rich people come in and they build a new structure or someone guts it and rehabs.”

Andrea stated, “In this community all I see are people go to

work, come home and eat, go to sleep and then go back to work.

“The people work in local factories, shops, and restaurants. But wages are very low. I worked at a place, but they only paid me 5 dollars an hour. They thought I was going to make money on my tips.

“Life is rough here. Sometimes the landlords don’t do anything for you. At least my landlord gave us a bag of salt to help with the recent snow. But most landlords don’t even do that. They expect us to pitch in and clean up the snow and get the equipment for it. My mother lives on 23rd and her landlord has never fixed anything. My stepdad has brought in makeshift stuff and tries to fix things.”

The city’s Democratic Party administration has done nothing since to assist families and victims of the fire. Little Village alderman, George Cardenas, a Democrat, has since dropped feigning any interest.

Henry said, “Alderman Cardenas has signs with his name on every front yard that people should pick up their dog poop. As far as I’m concerned, if I need protection from dog poop, I will call George Cardenas. But he is a dog poop in my mind. When I called his office, his assistant gave me a weepy story of ‘yeah, yeah that’s sad’ and told me to call a disconnected number. And other people have talked to George Cardenas and gotten no response either, he just blows them off. I can tell you he doesn’t give a shit about anyone who lost anything in that fire. The first thing he did was blame the parents for not being home. Shift the responsibility.

Henry added, “It’s a class issue. It doesn’t matter if those building burn, it doesn’t matter if those kids die. Does the city make money from it? It’s all about money. If those were rich kids, if it was a rich neighborhood, of course things would be done.

“Ten kids are dead. That’s just horrible. Multiple families have been displaced and the city and government, no one has done a damn thing for them. No one has even taken the time to even communicate with any of them. The only good thing that has happened is the Red Cross has helped, as well as another community organization, by giving us some money. Beyond that, everyone’s on their own. And everyone has probably gone off in different directions.”

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