

California (USA) housing crisis: Oakland's fire tragedy didn't have to happen

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The deadly fire at an Oakland artist collective has exposed the warped priorities of a city where fewer and people can afford to live, explains David Judd.

AT LEAST 36 people were killed by a fire that raged through a warehouse hosting a concert in Oakland's Fruitvale district last Friday night. City officials expect the death toll to rise, since the structure is still being searched—many victims have not yet been positively identified.

The immediate cause of the fire is unknown. But some of the larger causes are clear. As Maria Poblet, director of the local nonprofit Causa Justa, told the *Guardian*, "If you can't afford to buy a million-dollar home, then you can't afford to live in this city unless you're willing to risk your safety."

For dozens of young people in Oakland, that non-choice had deadly consequences.

Oakland rents have been rising at a double-digit pace each year [1]. This has resulted in massive displacement, with Oakland's Black population dropping by 23 percent between the 2000 and 2010 censuses [2].

Friday's aren't the first deaths that can be traced directly to the region's housing crisis. Even in the Bay Area's mild climate, homeless people die of exposure every year [3].

THE OAKLAND building, known as the Ghost Ship, was home for a collective of some 25 artists, who rented it from landlord Chor N. Ng under the legal pretense that it was only a working space. The building had been investigated by the city for code violations, and in the aftermath of the fire, some former residents and visitors described it as a "death trap" [4] and "tinderbox" [5] filled with clutter, with an unreliable electrical system [6] and no fire alarms. The building had a makeshift staircase leading to the second floor, where many people were trapped in the fire.

City officials have begun a criminal investigation into the fire. It's hard to have any sympathy for the landlord, who almost certainly knew that people were living in the building and chose not to invest in the basic safety measures required by fire codes. However, any crackdown on illegal residences won't be a step forward. As Sam Levin wrote in the *Guardian* [7]:

"When residents raise concerns about dangerous conditions, the results can be devastating in other ways. Earlier this year, dozens of renters lost their homes in an Oakland warehouse space after the city deemed it unsafe for habitation."

When the city determines a living situation is hazardous—which can often happen when an industrial warehouse is not permitted or built for residential living – it can create a pathway for real-estate developers to remove a low-income arts community and replace it with more profitable, market-rate housing."

Getting rid of affordable, underground spaces isn't the answer. Making those spaces safe and creating more affordable housing is.

People don't only live in underground spaces because of cheap rent. Many of the residents were trans or queer or other oppressed people who found mainstream spaces unsafe in other ways.

As Russell Butler, a musician close to many of those who lost their lives Friday, told the *East Bay Express* [8], "We need spaces that are open to folks who are beaten down and oppressed by living daily under patriarchy and white supremacy."

EMILY BIRNBAUM described the impact of the deadly fire:

"This is a devastating blow to the arts community in Oakland, with many of the victims being artists who were either performing at the party or were close friends of those putting on the event. The characterization of the party as a rave in the mainstream media is misguided. This was a party for the underground arts community by the underground arts community."

"The victims were painters, musicians, producers and DJs. A lot of the artists were of color, were women, were queer or trans. They were young, ambitious creatives who worked to create projects, events and spaces that were inclusive to a diverse range of people who did not fit in elsewhere. The purpose of the event was not to make a cheap buck by cutting corners. This was simply a party with the purpose of spreading joy through art and music. And then tragedy struck."

Birnbaum described how the community she is a part of is coping with this horror—but also the clampdown that is likely to come from city authorities:

"The arts community is coming together in impressive ways, already preparing for the attack on their spaces. I went to the vigil at Lake Merritt last night and a ceremony beforehand for an amazing person named Kiyomi who was lost in the fire. People were talking about feeling ready to fight for their spaces, for their existence as artists in Oakland."

"I have been invited to benefit after benefit for the victims of the fire, but also with the purpose of starting to raise money and awareness in making these live-work art spaces safer. People are donating fire extinguishers, asking for volunteer services from people who have trade skills, knowledge of zoning and fire code, people who do construction, electrical work, etc."

I think Oakland artists are ready for a serious fightback. Many of the people I know and saw last night easily could have been dead. I had a cold and didn't go. One of my best friends got there at 12 a.m., and the fire was already blazing. I have friends who were driving there. In fact, there were many people who went to the wrong address because it was posted incorrectly somewhere. They would have lost their lives, too, if not for that minor mistake.

Everyone feels like it could have been them, it could have been their best friend—or it was their best friend.

The community is grieving and suffering profoundly, but it is also coming together and emboldened to fight for their homes, their workspaces, their community and their lives. If the city thinks they are going to be able to respond to this tragedy by simply shutting down spaces similar to Ghost Ship, further marginalizing the very community that is suffering this loss, they are seriously mistaken."

A REAL effort to prevent future tragedies needs to include both massive expansion of affordable housing and the preservation of existing homes and spaces where artists and oppressed people find sanctuary.

Reactionary California laws like Proposition 13 and the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act, which make it practically impossible for cities and counties to fund affordable housing or cap the increase of rents, need to be repealed.

Ultimately, the allocation of resources by the market, according to the drive for profit rather than human need, must be challenged. Capitalism can't recognize the needs of people without money to pay for them, and can only value art to the extent that it can be made into a commodity.

What appears to most of us as a housing crisis appears to landlords as a spectacular opportunity to make money. With rents going up independent of any improvements to buildings they own, they need not act at all to become richer and richer.

The absurdity of this system will not prevent most of them from fighting desperately to preserve it, in cooperation of governments that are dependent on capital for tax revenue, even when politicians have not been purchased directly. We will need to break their power in order to find safe living space for everyone.

David Judd

Emily Birnbaum contributed to this article.

P.S.

* <https://socialistworker.org/2016/12/07/oaklands-tragedy-didnt-have-to-happen>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/blog/real-estate/2015/02/oakland-rents-home-prices-increase-trulia.html>

[2] <https://socialistworker.org/2014/10/02/project-gentrify-in-oakland>

[3] <http://www.mercurynews.com/2013/12/09/homeless-man-found-dead-sunday-may-be-seventh-in-bay-area-to-die-from-cold-snap/>

[4] <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-oakland-warehouse-safety-20161203-story.html>

[5] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/12/03/inside-the-oakland-party-fire-one-rickety-staircase-inside-a-tinderbox.html>

[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/04/us/warehouse-party-fire-oakland-search.html?_r=0

[7] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/05/oakland-warehouse-fire-ghost-ship-housing-crisis>

[8] <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/SevenDays/archives/2016/12/03/artists-at-last-nights-oakland-warehouse-fire-discuss-the-tragedy-those-missing-need-for-safe-underground-spaces>