

New York: Forced labor program for tenants

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Public housing residents in New York City are outraged over the requirement in recently enacted federal legislation that they be forced to perform eight hours of unpaid “community service” each month if they wish to remain in their apartments.

The obligation is contained in a bill passed overwhelmingly by Congress in 1998, the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act. Its main sponsor was Republican Congressman Rick Lazio, the unsuccessful Republican candidate for US Senator against Hillary Clinton in the 2000 election.

The work mandate is a part of the law that is to be phased in nationally in the coming year. It applies to 3 million people in public housing across the country, a relatively small figure that demonstrates how far spending for housing has fallen behind even the barest minimum needs. In New York City, however, despite almost no new public housing construction in recent decades, there are more than half a million tenants in public housing projects. With only about 3 percent of the national population, New York is home to more than 15 percent of the country's public housing residents.

There are more than 100,000 tenants living in the city projects who are illegally “doubled up” with family or friends, and for whom such arrangements are usually the only option separating them from homelessness. There are also hundreds of thousands on the waiting list for public housing.

The stated motivation of the 1998 law was to encourage a “work ethic” and provide for the beneficiaries of government assistance to “repay the taxpayers.” It amounts to nothing less than the stigmatization, if not criminalization, of millions of working people who in most cases pay substantial monthly rents for apartments that are often substandard.

While the law provides for exempting certain categories of tenants—including those younger than 18

and older than 62, the disabled, students and single parents of children under 13—it is estimated that between 50,000 and 60,000 tenants would still have to participate in the work program. Workers would have to be employed at their jobs for at least 30 hours a week in order to be excused from the eight hours a month of unpaid work. The law also exempts those in the city workfare program, which already forces tens of thousands to perform unpaid labor in exchange for public assistance. Apparently the framers of the legislation concluded that compelling some tenants to participate in two forced labor programs at the same time would be asking too much!

The WSWWS spoke to Judith Goldiner of the Legal Aid Society, which has been providing legal counsel for the Public Housing Residents Alliance, a group formed some five years ago. The tenants have asked the Legal Aid Society to explore the possibility of a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the law.

Ms. Goldiner explained that the authorities have not at this point suggested using the tenants to perform jobs formerly performed by city workers, as is the case in the city's workfare program. The single-minded determination to make an example of the poor has apparently led to a situation in which no provision has been made for the kind of community service the public housing residents are to perform. Each locality is responsible for its own program. In New York, the Housing Authority has suggested that they could work for various nonprofit community groups, a proposal that ignores the fact that such groups have their own specific needs and hiring policies.

The attack on the tenants of public housing in New York takes place in the context of a housing crisis without precedent in the city. Apartments renting for less than 50 percent of median income are virtually nonexistent, with luxury housing sprouting in some areas of the city at monthly rents that substantially

exceed the monthly gross earnings for most workers.

The attempt to stigmatize public housing is a convenient diversion, directing the frustration of small homeowners and renters onto those sections of workers one or two notches below them in income and social conditions. The idea is to brand the poor as personally to blame for their position. In the general climate of budget-cutting and attacks on social spending, not all government spending is denounced equally. There is a conscious attempt to pit the middle class and better-off sections of workers against the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the working class. The poor are by definition “undeserving” and every penny spent to assist them should if possible be reimbursed, by forced labor if necessary. As Ethel B. Velez of the Public Housing Residents Alliance declared about the federal requirement, “For me, it's clearly a form of slavery.”

The 1998 law is a perfect example of the division of labor that emerged in the course of the Clinton administration. While the Republicans spearheaded the vindictive attack on public housing residents, the Democrats overwhelmingly acquiesced. Bill Clinton signed the bill, and newly-elected Senator Hillary Clinton has said nothing about it.

Tenant representatives have voted 37 to 1 advising against participating in the work program. Several hundred tenants have been organizing a trip to Washington DC to argue for repeal of the legislation.



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