New York City building workers locked out over demands for wage and benefit cuts

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Seventy-three workers at the Flatbush Gardens housing complex in New York City's borough of Brooklyn have been locked out since November 29. Renaissance Equity Holdings (REH), owners of Flatbush Gardens, forced the workers off their jobs after they refused to accept drastic cuts to their wages, health coverage, pensions and other benefits.

Workers' wages, which currently fall between $18 and $21 an hour, would be reduced to the range of $9-14 an hour. The average wage cut comes to 34 percent of a worker's salary. Under the deal proposed by REH, workers would be required to contribute roughly $100 a week for health coverage, making it virtually impossible to afford.

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ, which represents the workers, had been negotiating with REH for most of the year without any agreement. Workers had continued to work under the terms of the old contract, which expired in April. They had authorized a strike in August.

In order to impose its demands,REH has hired scab contractors to replace the workers. According to *YourNabe.com*,the company stated that "the complex will use temporary replacement workers until the union accepts the proposal." These workers are largely untrained.

Workers have been picketing outside the management's office, calling for the restoration of their jobs and previous wages.

Built in 1949, Flatbush Gardens, previously known as Vanderveer Estates, is a 59-building complex housing over 10,000 people. Many of the apartments are rent-stabilized.

One of the principal owners of REH is David Bistricer, a real estate mogul and accused New York City slumlord. He and his partners bought Flatbush Gardens in 2005 for $138 million. Initially, Bistricer made repairs and the number of accumulated housing violations decreased.

As REH then aggressively marketed the complex to sections of the middle class looking for alternatives to the sky-high rents in Manhattan, housing violations started to increase after 2007. Residents have charged that the new management has deliberately attempted to create intolerable conditions in order to drive them out and make the property available to be rented to better-heeled tenants at much higher rents.

Bistricer and his firm, Clipper Equity, attempted to pull off a similar buyout and reconversion in 2007 at Starrett City, the largest federally subsidized housing complex in the country. He was blocked by federal authorities, however, amid fear that he would drive out many of the complex's 14,000 low and middle-income residents.

In Flatbush Gardens, the neglect by Bistricer and REH and previous owners has led to the deterioration of the complex. REH has accumulated over 1,000 housing violations classified as immediately hazardous, including backed-up sewage and collapsing ceilings. "You can't put a band-aid on a broken pipe and expect it to last," Marietta Smalls, president of the Flatbush Gardens Tenants Association, told television station NewYork1.

Management has blamed the maintenance staff for the problems plaguing the complex, but the workers point out that they were not given adequate supplies for cleaning and repairs. The media quoted one of the workers, Shawn Williams, a boiler technician, who said, "Maintenance workers were given just 10 buckets of joint compound to patch holes in walls at the 2,500-unit site."

While the union is asking REH to bargain in good faith, other workers have shown their solidarity with those who have been locked out. Sanitation workers have not collected the trash for approximately two weeks, leading to huge mounds of trash. UPS, Fedex and Verizon workers are refusing to cross the picket lines and have stopped servicing the complex.

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers picketing the complex.

Joseph Marshall, a porter with six years at Flatbush Gardens, told the WSWS, “We have families that we have to support. We all feel this. The company wants to cut our wages by over a third. They want to cut our heath insurance. I had a $15 co-pay for my medical visits. Now the company wants to charge us $500 a month. As of December 28, we have none at all. They’re going to war on us like this is slavery. The new people they’ve brought in don’t know how to do the task, like trash compacting. They’re not trained and it’s dangerous.

“If they go ahead with this, we will keep fighting. What is going on doesn’t make sense. They want to take our wages down from $21 an hour to $11 for porters. This landlord has 8,000 violations.”

When asked about the role of the city government, Joseph said, “The system is biased against us. Why do we have this man as mayor?” he said, referring to billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg. “When he says jump, his people say, how high? No one asks any questions. What we need is someone in office that’s been out there in the struggle, who knows what’s going on. Not someone like Cathleen Black, who he just put in to run the schools. She’s an executive without any experience with education.”

Another porter told us, “I can’t even pay the rent now, with what unemployment provides. If not for my wife, at any moment I could be evicted. My wife working is what makes it possible.”

We asked workers how the tenants in the complex felt about the strike. One gestured to a stand with hot food and drinks “The tenants are with us. They’re out here all the time. They come every day with this,” he said.

Bistricer and the whole ruling elite, with the determined help of Democratic and Republican politicians, have gone to war on affordable housing, decent education and living wages. Company after company has come to its workers and demanded massive wage and benefit cuts.

If Bistricer succeeds in this assault against the Flatbush Gardens workers, it will open the floodgates to wage-cutting and benefit slashing among all building workers in the city. It will also sharpen the appetite of the real estate kings for rent hikes and service cuts, especially in large building complexes with working class tenants.

These attacks are being encouraged and supported by the politicians of both major parties. New York’s billionaire mayor, Republican Michael Bloomberg, announced the destruction of 10,000 city workers’ jobs last month, and recently appointed publishing executive Cathleen Black as schools chancellor to push forward the agenda of closing public schools, laying off teachers and establishing more private charter schools. New York’s new governor, Democrat Andrew Cuomo, is carrying through the layoffs of nearly 900 state workers and has promised a wage freeze for tens of thousands more, while seeking drastic cuts in social benefits.

Local 32BJ has not called on its 70,000 members in the New York area to actively support the Flatbush Gardens workers, let alone calling the Flatbush Gardens workers themselves out on strike. Instead, it has isolated the workers’ struggle, hoping to reach an agreement with REH on some kind of concessions deal.

One union official, when asked by the *World Socialist Web Site* why the SEIU local did not mobilize its full membership to stop the union-busting at Flatbush Gardens, rejected even the possibility of such action, exclaiming, “That’s impossible! That’s never been done before!”

Affordable housing and decent wages are social rights of the working class. What is required to defend these rights is nothing less than a mass political mobilization of building workers and tenants on a socialist program. Such a program must include the demand for a workers government that will ensure a living wage and low-cost medical benefits by nationalizing the financial and housing industries under democratic control, constructing millions of new homes and apartments, available at low cost, and spending billions of dollars to repair older housing stock such as Flatbush Gardens.

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