

Rent strike threat after deaths at storm-ravaged New York housing complex

A WSWS reporting team
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Two and a half weeks after Hurricane Sandy struck the East Coast of the United States, thousands of people remained without electricity, heat, or hot water. In some areas of Long Island, victims organized rallies to protest the failure of the local utility company, LIPA, to restore power to their homes.

In New York City, some residents of Knickerbocker Village, a 1,600-unit housing complex in Manhattan's Lower East Side, had called for a rent strike over the lack of electricity, heat and hot water, conditions that led to the deaths of two elderly residents last week.

On Tuesday, November 9, a 101-year-old woman, Pao Chu Hsieh, died in a fifth-floor apartment. Heavily bundled up against the cold, she died after experiencing breathing problems. Another elderly woman was reported to have died after her oxygen machine malfunctioned and she was unable to leave a 10th-floor apartment because of the lack of power and elevators.

Power was only restored late on Thursday, while problems remain with heat and hot water.

Knickerbocker Village, a privately run middle-income housing development, is located, together with the lower-income Hamilton-Madison public housing project, on the Manhattan side of the East River, between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges. Both complexes were badly damaged by the flood surge that poured up the East River and into lower Manhattan.

For many residents, the disparity between the response to the life-threatening conditions that were allowed to persist for over two weeks in their buildings and the response to the storm in the financial district, where the Stock Exchange was up and running two days after Sandy and Goldman Sachs never lost electric power, is all too obvious.

There have been rent battles going on for years here.

Knickerbocker Village has been described in the past as a "hotbed for social activism." This is where Julius and Ethel Rosenberg lived until they were jailed and then executed. Rent battles continue in Knickerbocker Village where approximately 4,000 people live. Reflecting the immigrant history of the Lower East Side, residents are Jewish, Latino and now in their majority Chinese.

Leaflets calling for a rent strike had been posted in a number of building. The seething discontent led the complex's management to hold a "community meeting" on Tuesday, bringing in local Democratic politicians, including New York State Assembly speaker Sheldon Silver and New York City borough president and candidate for mayor Scott Stringer. The landlord said the electricity would be restored in two days, and management has announced a rent abatement deal under which tenants will not have to pay for the days that they did not have essential services.

At Hamilton-Madison House, a community service center where a "warming" center was set up for residents from the Hamilton project, Knickerbocker Village and the nearby Smith public housing, the WSWS spoke to the director, Vicki Mehmel. She explained that the center provides not only a place to get warm, but also meals and other forms of assistance. She added, however, that all of the supplies they had for victims came from volunteers who "just showed up with donations," not from FEMA.

"The water was like a river," Vicki said of the storm surge. "We have some of our 14 sites on Catherine Street still not open because of the flooding. Water even came in through the window of a site, and nine first-floor apartments were damaged there. I don't want to complain about our situation. I am just glad that the staff of Hamilton House was able to come together and deal with this. Normally we serve 5,000—seniors, early childhood, after school programs, and so on. This week, we are even

busier than last. We have had people coming from all over, even from Staten Island. We cannot have people sleeping here, but we stay open as long as we can.”

Carmen Valentin was at the Hamilton-Madison House. She is from the Gov. Alfred E. Smith Houses, a nearby public housing complex with nearly 6,000 residents, 30 percent of whom are senior citizens. She explained, “We tried to survive on my floor during Sandy. I live on the sixth floor. I had stocked up with a lot of water, but I ran out after three days.

“We were in Zone A, and they told us to evacuate on Sunday, but where could I go? The shelters were horrible. My friend went to a shelter during Irene. She is diabetic and wheelchair-bound. A fight broke out at the shelter, and she ended up in the hospital with a heart attack.

“I lost all the food in the refrigerator when the lights, power, heat and water went out. They turned our power off on Sunday, a day before Sandy hit. I was talking to a friend who did go to the shelter about 7:45 on Sunday evening. She said the power went out there, and minutes later I saw the power go out in our building. They just told us they were going to shut off the elevator at 7 p.m. They didn’t say anything about the power.

“This is Bloomberg. I have nothing against millionaires, but I know they are going to hell. Maybe they were shutting off the elevator and power for safety reasons, but the storm wasn’t here yet. They were trying to drive us out. This is a millionaire’s island. To them we don’t count. We are not middle class. The poor and the working class is what we are. I worked in a factory since I was 14. I’ve worked in import-export, and I did odd jobs after I got sick.

“I have worked as a mechanic. I know you have to take care of the infrastructure. They used Sandy as an excuse. They couldn’t fix the lights, power and heat at Smith for five days with all their technology? Who was handling the Christmas package for Wall Street, which got its lights back on in one day? There was nothing in that package for us.

“I have lived at Smith Houses for 37 years, and the conditions are deteriorating. This is not an accident. At some point, they will say it is unfixable, and they will get rid of all of us.

“A few more days with no lights, heat or water, we would have done anything to stop the suffering from Sandy. You feel lost, isolated, like nobody, not even human, on this island of progressiveness. I think this is

the same scenario as Katrina. The powers that be were not prepared, and they kept us in the dark for five days. There is more behind this than meets the eye. This is not an act of God. It is an act of man.”

Hadassah Diaz-Linn, a social worker, is a resident of Knickerbocker Village and a building representative in the Tenants Association. She told the WSWS, “The first thing that happened when Sandy hit is that we lost power. I live on the 12th floor, and my husband is somewhat disabled. We had no heat, no lights, no elevators and no water. The Knickerbocker management should have been communicating with us and posting messages. They did not.

“There were 10 feet of water in the basement, and we did not have any generators. There were fires here that were started when someone from Con Ed or from management tried to turn on the electricity switch when all the wires were corroded with the ocean salt.

“There was talk of a rent strike,” Hadassah continued, “and there were signs calling for a rent strike posted in many buildings. The person who is the spokesperson for the tenants association then sent out an e-mail telling us not to call for a rent strike. I am the building rep in my building, and I wrote back that Knickerbocker management needed to post a notice that we do not have to pay rent for the days that we did not have services. I specifically mentioned Stuyvesant Town, where management had said there would be this kind of rent abatement.

“I think the meeting with Sheldon Silver and the rest was primarily because of the two deaths. No one wants to have two deaths on their doorstep. However, the issue of a rent strike was also involved.

“Money speaks. The ruling elite have their priorities, which is Wall Street. Knickerbocker Village residents are the striving working class of people. It seems that they forgot about us. There is a class divide in society.”



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