

Hurricane lays bare social misery in New York's public housing complexes

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When Hurricane Sandy hit the northeast United States last fall, one of its effects was to expose the class reality in New York City, the capital of finance and of inequality. Among those hardest hit were many tens of thousands of mainly poor and working class residents of public housing complexes in low-lying areas ravaged by the storm.

They were effectively abandoned by the administration of billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg. While the New York Stock Exchange was back in operation in two days, weeks went by before any effective assistance reached large numbers of people virtually trapped in high-rise apartment blocks.

The conditions facing the public housing residents were not only the result of the delays in assistance. As outrageous as these were, they were only the latest manifestation of decades-long decline and neglect caused by budget cuts and the resulting cuts in maintenance and services.

The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) is responsible for 345 housing developments with 181,000 apartments and approximately 420,000 low-income residents throughout the city. Twenty-six of these housing complexes are located in "Zone A," the lowest-lying portion of the city, which was designated for "mandatory evacuation."

According to a report in the *New York Times*, "402 of its [NYCHA's] buildings housing 77,000 residents lost electricity and elevators, with most of them also losing heat and hot water." Many had no running water at all, meaning that, among other problems, they could not flush toilets. Those who were able were reduced to filling up buckets at fire hydrants and hauling them up darkened stairways.

It took the authority nearly three weeks to restore services to all of its buildings. Many NYCHA tenants are elderly and/or infirm and had no way of heeding the City's mandatory evacuation order. After the storm, the occupants were isolated, with no means of escape and nowhere to go even if they had been able to leave. Some tenants are immigrants with limited or no English, and may not have understood the gravity of the situation as the storm approached.

City officials have blamed the tenants for not complying with the mandatory evacuation order. However, emergency shelters set up by the city were completely inadequate to deal with the situation. Buses were reportedly provided to shuttle residents to these locations. Numerous reports, however, show that those shelters that did exist rapidly became overcrowded, filthy and dangerous. Many chose to stay in their own apartments, in the dark and cold, often without water or access to food, rather than be subjected to the conditions in the so-called shelters.

NYCHA tenants, along with working class occupants of privately owned apartment complexes, could not afford to stay in hotels and most did not have relatives who could put them up or the ability to get there if they did. NYCHA complexes are home to a large number of the city's poorest residents. The 2008 financial crisis hit this population very hard. A 2011 study found that approximately 27 percent of NYCHA tenants were unemployed in 2010, a three-fold increase in just two years.

NYCHA reports that following Sandy, 699 elevators in its buildings were out of service. It took weeks to get them back in operation. Since many of these buildings are high-rise apartment blocks, the lack of elevator service meant that the only way in or out was completely dark, dank and narrow staircases. Tenants in wheelchairs or with other infirmities were effectively trapped in their apartments. Numerous published interviews have documented that even for able-bodied residents the trip up and down many flights of cold, wet stairs, in total darkness, often without even a flashlight (fresh batteries were impossible to obtain) proved a nearly insurmountable obstacle to escape or the procurement of supplies.

Housing Authority and other city officials were ignorant, unprepared and surprised by the conditions faced by the tenants. The authorities repeatedly predicted that life would return to normal shortly, only to be proven wrong time and again.

The indifference of the city's elite in the face of the devastation wrought by Sandy on a significant portion of the

working class population was epitomized by Mayor Bloomberg. On November 13, two weeks after the storm hit, the mayor triumphantly tweeted that all power had been restored to all NYCHA buildings. Aside from the fact that thousands of people went for up to two weeks without electricity, the mayor overlooked the fact that 81 buildings, home to nearly 16,000 tenants, were still without heat and hot water, and a number of buildings lacked elevator service as well. In the aftermath of the storm, NYCHA told its employees not to respond to inquiries about conditions at its facilities.

NYCHA is the largest public housing system in the country. In many other large cities in the US the trend in recent decades has been to demolish public housing complexes and leave poorer sections of the working class to fend for themselves. Although public housing has not yet been dismantled in New York, conditions have been allowed to deteriorate steadily.

Decades of funding cuts by federal, state, and city governments have contributed to this state of affairs. In a 2011 report, NYCHA states that it has been chronically under funded since 2002, due to cutbacks in federal assistance for operating expenses amounting to approximately \$714 million. In addition, beginning in 1998, support from the state and city has been cut by \$90 million annually. There have also been major reductions in money needed for repair and replacement of facilities and equipment. Federal money for NYCHA's capital budget was cut by \$44 million in 2011.

Among the adjustments the authority has made is to transfer tens of millions of dollars from its capital to its operating budget, meaning that basic upkeep and replacement of infrastructure has been delayed.

A \$10 million study of NYCHA funded by the city and released last August revealed that the authority had at that time a backlog of 330,000 orders for maintenance and repairs and that tenants frequently have to wait for months, even years, for repairs to be made. One of the study's principal proposals to address the authority's budgetary difficulties was a substantial reduction in staff. This would inevitably worsen the already deplorable level of services to tenants as well as adding more people to the city's unemployed.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a study commissioned by the city [New Orleans, LA] recommended raising critical infrastructure to higher levels as protection against flooding, but this was not done. Electrical and heating equipment in most buildings are located at or below ground level. These were, therefore, flooded and severely damaged or destroyed by the storm. No contingency plans had been established to quickly bring in emergency

equipment. It took weeks to truck in and install emergency generators and boilers to restore electricity, heat and hot water to all the affected buildings. The failure to make the recommended preparations compounded the effects of years of declining investment and a general lack of effective preparation in advance of the storm.

In the days immediately following the storm, the city made no serious effort to reach those trapped in the flooded neighborhoods. Initially, the only assistance came from an ad hoc assemblage of volunteers in a hastily arranged effort to canvas the housing complexes and assess the situation. These efforts, though well-intentioned, were completely inadequate. It took over a week for the city to begin to organize a systematic effort to assess conditions and bring aid to tenants in both public and private apartment complexes, using trained medical personnel assisted by the National Guard.

The long-term effects of Sandy on NYCHA tenants and others in flooded areas will be significant. One major consequence of flooding is the moisture left behind in walls, floors, and ceilings. The resulting rampant mold growth can cause serious respiratory and skin problems, including asthma. The only effective way to prevent this is to tear out and replace the affected structural components. However, NYCHA has chosen to deploy cleaning crews merely to apply disinfectant to areas where mold is found to grow. This condemns tenants to lingering health effects for years to come.

The suffering is not limited to public housing. Privately owned apartment blocks in flooded areas, many of whose residents are also poor, elderly and infirm, were left for weeks without heat, water and other services, with landlords refusing to spend the money necessary for restoration.

Mayor Bloomberg has estimated that up to 40,000 New Yorkers, mostly in public housing, would need temporary, long-term alternative accommodations. Measures so far have been totally inadequate to meet this need.



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