

New York City workers speak out on conditions six months after hurricane

A reporting team
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A WSWS reporting team recently visited the Rockaways in New York City to speak with residents about the conditions they face, six months after Superstorm Sandy.

Shayeeda Espinal is a 22-year-old resident of public housing in Far Rockaway who is working as a Certified Nursing Assistant. She spoke of the continuing hardships caused by the lack of an effective recovery effort.

“FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] didn’t give us anything. I lost my washer, dryer and bedroom set. My little sister lost her bed. I lost my comfort zone in my home. I lost my security in the safety of the place I live.

“FEMA denied my family and all the people in my apartment [building] who suffered damage, but lived above the first floor. The upper six floors were denied anything by FEMA, and I think this is the same for every project. Every housing project in the Rockaways—all five projects—lost power and were damaged by Sandy. They all have about 14 buildings, the same as we do, and thousands, maybe ten-thousand residents. I think FEMA denied almost everyone except people living on the first floor [i.e., those areas flooded by storm surge].

“After Sandy, NYCHA [the New York City Housing Authority] came to our apartment and cleaned the mold wearing white protective suits. I never went down to the basement because of the smell down there. It still smells, and our garbage disposal only started working yesterday.

“NYCHA does not do a good job with repairs. They just repaired my windows from when I sent in a repair ticket two years ago.

“To get hot water now, you have to turn on the faucet and the shower and let them run for 20 minutes. Even

before Sandy, we complained about the heat. You can put in tickets for repair, but they don’t do anything.

“They had studies done about what would happen with climate change, and with a storm like Sandy. Some days are nice, like today, but there has been snow late this year. The rainstorms are harsh, and then they stop. ‘The Day After Tomorrow’ movie could happen in New York because the glaciers are melting. Katrina was horrible, and we went through a taste of Katrina, and our leaders didn’t help us.

“I don’t agree with putting a luxury high-rise in the housing projects as NYCHA is trying to do. They want to drive us out. We are poor, immigrant, black and Latino, and now many Chinese. There is a double standard. They try to make it as uncomfortable for us as possible, to force us out. It is an attack on working people, but it is the working people that make the world spin.”

Mickey Key, a retired counselor, agreed about FEMA’s denial of assistance to those who need it, and that reconstruction has not focused on people’s real needs. “You lose your washing machine and dryer. You lose other furnishings and possessions as well. I live on the 6th floor of an apartment building one building from the ocean. They are trying to fix the boardwalks for the summer. They haven’t fixed jack yet. It is all gone with the wind.

“I think it is sad that so many people are still suffering six months after Sandy and the flood. So many people don’t have their homes, and they don’t have the money to rebuild.

“I saw boats on the lawns of the housing projects during Sandy, and I had to flee to Brooklyn. I had to rent a room for a week. I didn’t stand in the lines to get food or supplies because I thought other people needed them more than me.

Mr. Key likened the devastation in one neighborhood to the effects of war. “I have ridden the bus through Breezy Point [another Rockaway community], and people are still in need. Many people are not back in their homes there. After Sandy and the fire, Breezy Point looks like World War II in London after the Nazis bombed the city.”

S. Wood, a part-time food handler, lives in public housing in the Rockaways. She explained, “When FEMA came in to assess the damage, they wanted to know if flood waters came directly into your apartment and flooded you. I live on the third floor, and it did not flood directly into my apartment. I didn’t have flood insurance. I lived here for 40 years, and there has been nothing like Sandy.

“FEMA didn’t give you anything for your hardship or your suffering. You felt you were living in a cave with a candle. The hallways and stairs were pitch black, and of course, the elevators were out. I was pulling water, food, blankets and other things three floors up for myself and more floors up higher for others for three weeks.”

Wood summed up the total failure of every level of government to adequately respond to the crisis caused by Sandy. “We took care of the people in the upper floors, the seniors and disabled in our buildings ourselves. We looked after ourselves. Everybody was helping each other. The city and state didn’t do anything. All the stuff we got was from ourselves and volunteers.

“I got a one-month rent reduction from NYCHA and that was all. I don’t know what FEMA did for anybody. FEMA did nothing when some people on the first floor were wiped out. FEMA didn’t give us a cup of coffee. I was asked if I had flood insurance. In the first place, they don’t want to give you flood insurance out here, and in the second place, I just work part-time.

“The people on the bay got hit the worst. I don’t think Far Rockaway has recovered. It looks like people are out doing normal shopping, but there are no stores up on Rockaway Beach Boulevard. A lot of stores are closing. The Key Food grocery chain is out, and for blocks people don’t have a grocery store. They are still giving away food here on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. People stay on lines for a long time.

“They want to repair the boardwalk so the tourists can come in. When you see a boardwalk, you think

everything is OK. What should be considered is a real educational program and what is happening, about climate change. I think they need to build sea walls. My son says they have them in Finland. It is a miracle a lot more people didn’t drown.

“Bloomberg said he didn’t want sea walls because they would mess up the waterways. I heard he said you cannot hold back the tide. But the tide you can’t hold back is when the revolution comes and the have-nots don’t have and they see the haves are fat and comfortable. This is happening around the world. This is an eye-opener. The whole situation is getting out of hand.”



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