

Widening inequality intensifies New York City housing crisis

Fred Mazelis

27 September 2014

Last November New York City voted to exchange its billionaire mayor for a Democrat, a self-styled “progressive” who promised to improve conditions for the millions of struggling workers and the poor. As the first year of Bill de Blasio’s term in office begins to wind down, however, the “tale of two cities” slogan on which he campaigned to demonstrate his supposed concern is no less apt. Nowhere is this more evident than in the city’s housing crisis.

Not a week goes by without a new report on the millions who scrape to come up with the rent each month and the tens of thousands who live in fear of homelessness. Meanwhile, “conspicuous consumption” does not begin to describe the thousands of multi-million dollar condominiums sprouting up in midtown and lower Manhattan, many of which are used primarily for investment purposes and are not even occupied for more than a few weeks of the year.

While de Blasio is adept, like Bill Clinton before him, at “feeling the pain” of the homeless and those threatened with homelessness, the attacks have continued, especially on the city’s working poor. Many of these families live in the housing projects run by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) or receive rent assistance through the federal Section 8 housing voucher program, so called because it is based on Section 8 of the Federal Housing Act of 1937.

Tens of thousands of families in New York City alone use these vouchers to live in private buildings, in apartments they could not otherwise afford. They pay 30 percent of their income for rent, and the voucher makes up the difference.

The WSWs reported last year on a demonstration of hundreds of tenants facing the threat of eviction from their homes because of Section 8 cutbacks and the finding by bureaucrats from the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development that they were living in apartments deemed too large for their family’s size.

There has been no letup in these attacks and threats against the hard-pressed working people who depend on Section 8 housing assistance. The Section 8 program costs about \$400 million annually in New York, but because of federal budget

cuts faces a deficit of \$37 million this year. It has stopped issuing new vouchers and has also informed 9,000 households that they are “overhoused.”

Several tenants at 599 Morris Avenue in the South Bronx who are affected by the cuts spoke to the WSWs this week.

“I received a letter from management stating that I must downsize,” said Sandra, who lives with her adult son. “They say that other people need the apartment. My son is on the lease and he is 30 years old, and they are demanding that he be off the lease. I also take care of three grandchildren who, though they do live with their parents, need to stay with me quite often.

“I have been living in a two bedroom apartment in 599 Morris for the last 30 years. A lot of people have been forced out of their apartments, and they are very upset and angry about it.

“I just started to go to school about a month ago to be a nursing assistant. I used to be a dental assistant, but I want more job security and benefits like health insurance.

“Market rate for my apartment is \$1,500, which is way too high. I can’t afford that. I pay \$380 and section 8 pays the rest to the landlord. If I do get a job that pays more money, then I would have to pay more.”

Ms. N. Coleman said, “I have been living in this building for 32 years, since it was built.

“I have not received a letter, but management has told me indirectly that I might have to move into a one bedroom apartment. This happened when I asked them for permission to parquet the floor, and they told me not to waste my money since I can’t take that with me when I am downsized. I live in a two bedroom apartment with my 31-year-old son, and they assume that he will move out.”

“The city is not about what you want, but what they want. It is like shaking hands with the devil.

“The Republicans and the Democrats are for the rich. The Republicans just steal from you and they say to hell with you. The Democrats throw you a few peanuts in order to keep you quiet.”

The Section 8 cuts, as cruel as they are, are only one small

piece of the housing crisis in New York. Only a few weeks ago, City Comptroller Scott Stringer released a report detailing the disastrous condition of the city's public housing stock, home to between 400,000 and 500,000 people. Administered by the New York City Housing Authority, these 334 properties comprising 2,600 buildings face a situation that the housing authority's chairwoman admitted was "beyond triage."

The public housing projects have been the victim of deepening budget cuts that have already created appalling conditions. As a feature in the *New York Times* detailed, the agency faces a deficit of \$77 million this year, and has unfunded capital needs of \$18 billion.

Eighty percent of the tenants in New York's public housing earn less than \$42,000 for a family of four. Months and even years go by without the most basic repairs to their apartments. Many live with chronic leaks, mold and maintenance problems that represent health hazards. They have few if any other options, however. They cannot find another apartment they can afford—especially as programs such as Section 8 face repeated cuts.

Perhaps the most dramatic indication of the conditions facing the working class is the fact that, despite the conditions described above, 250,000 households remain on the waiting list for apartments in the housing projects. As bad as conditions are, millions are prepared to endure them because they have few if any alternatives.

Over and above these conditions, one-third of the city's population, especially those who must pay market rate for apartments—\$1,500 monthly or more, even in the more "affordable" outer boroughs of Queens, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Staten Island—pays more than one-half of its income for housing. And the official homeless count remains at near-record levels.

At the same time, as anyone who walks the streets of Manhattan south of 96th Street can attest, sky-high luxury buildings, so numerous that they have spawned the adjective "hyper-tall," seem to appear overnight. The renewed boom for high-priced condominiums has led non-profit organizations to sell their properties "en masse," in the words of one web site, to cash in on the demand. St. John's University sold a dorm building for \$233 million; United Cerebral Palsy gave up its headquarters in exchange for \$135 million, and so on.

The frenzy among the very wealthy for an apartment in Manhattan's gilded neighborhoods has given rise to one 31-unit condo building where the apartments are expected to sell for about \$10 million, and, in addition, parking spaces are being added to the deal for another \$1 million each.

The worsening housing conditions and the yawning gulf between the plutocrats and the vast majority are producing

concern in certain establishment circles. The potential for, indeed the inevitability of, a social explosion has given rise to the wringing of hands and to various proposals to alleviate the crisis.

Some of the proposals for piddling amounts of affordable housing have only become further exposures of the way in which inequality infects every sphere of life. Thus the notorious "poor doors," where "separate and unequal" housing is included in one building, with separate entrances for the non-millionaires. This raised a storm when it was publicized some weeks ago. In fact, as the *Gothamist* web site reported, "poor doors" are "quite common."

The de Blasio administration and liberal housing advocates claim there are various schemes through which money can be raised to meet the minimal needs of those in the public housing projects, as well as those in similar if not worse situations, all while accepting as inevitable the cuts in government subsidies. The mayor has promised 200,000 new units of affordable housing over the next 10 years, a goal that has been called ambitious. But, as some have pointed out, the city is expected to lose 38,000 affordable units on an annual basis at the same time. The numbers don't add up—in fact they "subtract."

As demonstrated in the fate of de Blasio's half-hearted proposal earlier this year for a tiny tax increase on the wealthy to fund pre-kindergartens, even the most minimal reforms are excluded under the present political and social setup. The right to housing, education, health care and other basic needs cannot be defended outside of an independent political struggle by the working class against both parties of Wall Street, including and particularly the Democrats, who have anointed de Blasio as their current "left" spokesman.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact