

London's New Era housing estate residents take protest to Downing Street

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Residents of the East London New Era housing estate and hundreds of their supporters marched to the estate's corporate headquarters in Mayfair on December 1, then on to deliver a petition to 10 Downing Street. The petition contains 294,000 signatures appealing to Prime Minister David Cameron and London Mayor Boris Johnson to intervene in their struggle against rent increases and the threat of eviction.

Earlier this year, the 93-unit estate in Hackney was purchased by American investment firm Westbrook Partners—in partnership with Conservative MP Richard Benyon's multimillion-pound family estate. Immediately after Westbrook took ownership, it announced plans to regenerate the property to bring the flats to market rates, threatening long-time residents with eviction. Many residents have leases with a break clause of just two weeks, which if exercised could render them homeless.

For more than 80 years, New Era was owned and operated by the Lever family and rents remained low by London standards—some rented for £163 per week. Commenting on the sale, Alex Hilton, director for Generation Rent, suggested that the Lever family was likely offered a purchase price they couldn't refuse. "Not screwing your tenants becomes less and less rational as the market rate goes up. Estate agents are on landlords' backs all the time telling them they could get better rents. It becomes less and less rational to be a decent human being to your tenants," he said.

Hilton said the New Era estate situation is nothing new. "This happens all the time," he said. "Landlords put up rent by 20 or 30 percent just to avoid evicting people through a legal process. The New Era estate issue is the ugliest characterisation of what happens all over the country, every day."

In response to the residents' protest, Westbrook Partners issued a statement saying, "Westbrook has sent two letters in the last 10 days, reassuring tenants that Westbrook had no plans to cancel residential leases and that Westbrook was working on appointing a new permanent property manager. Westbrook told tenants that there will be no changes to their residential leases and no increases in rents *during the first half of 2015* and that a dedicated tenant liaison officer is in the final stages of being appointed" (emphasis added).

Lindsey Garrett, a resident of the New Era residents' association, commented that Westbrook's statement serves as a delaying tactic. "Westbrook are hoping this will die down and we are going to go away, but we won't because we haven't got anywhere else to go," she said.

At Sunday's demonstration, Garrett commented, "It's not just Hackney. It's across London. It's across the country. Why are they not building more social housing for people? Why are people being pushed and being forced out of London?"

The Bradley family, also New Era tenants, were interviewed and one of the family members said, "Three generations of his family have lived on this (the New Era) estate. We've already started to split up because of what they are going to do to us."

In a November 2014 YouTube video, New Era Estate families made a popular appeal for support against Westbrook's ownership and administration. Lindsay Garrett encouraged Westbrook tenants to stand in solidarity to fight against Westbrook.

Another resident commented that Westbrook, a global estate management firm, has a bad reputation as a landlord and yet they are allowed to buy properties in London. "Why is it that they are still allowed to buy into people's homes and wreck their lives?" she asked.

Another resident asked, “Why is the government allowing predatory landlords to come and buy our estate?”

In 2008, New York City residents protested against Westbrook’s predatory lending in the city’s East Village. They charged that tenants of Westbrook Partners’ properties suffered “concerted harassment.” One of the tenants reported that “for at least 15 days, our building had no hot water or heat. I spoke to Josh [the property manager] the day before Thanksgiving to find out what is going to happen over the holiday weekend and would we be without heat. His response was ‘Buy a space heater’.”

The tenants appealed to residents of prospective Westbrook investment property Starrett City to reject the real estate investment firm’s bid to buy the affordable housing complex in Brooklyn.

Since the current financial crisis began in 2008, housing prices in London and the UK have soared, creating a crisis of epic proportions. The 2014 English Housing Survey reports that renters spend an average of 40 percent of their weekly income on housing and in London one in 30 households are at risk of losing their homes. The lack of affordable housing is expected to worsen due to a shortage in housing stock. In 2011-2012, London’s population grew by 108,000, yet there were only 16,800 new properties completed.

Media coverage of the New Era 4 All protest has focused on yet another attack on comedian Russell Brand’s support for the residents—based upon a reporter’s demand that Brand reveal the price of his own London residence and all but blaming him for the rising price of property in the capital. Brand replied that his home was rented, and that the criticism was only a means of ignoring or belittling the New Era residents’ protest.



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