

Brooklyn real estate developer assails building workers and tenants

Steve Light, Allen Whyte
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Nine building maintenance workers in the Bedford-Stuyvesant community of Brooklyn in New York City were fired from their jobs for refusing cuts in wages and benefits. The attack is part of the gentrification that is driving up rents and reducing affordable housing options throughout the city.

On March 1, Bushburg Properties bought and took over management of 1711 Fulton Street, a complex of four buildings with 283 apartments, for \$38 million. The next day, workers received letters informing them that their wages were cut from \$22 to \$12 an hour. The ultimatum from Vertices Holding Company, which owns Bushburg Properties, also announced that the pension plan, health care benefits, accumulated vacation days, and work rules under the union contract were terminated. The previous owner had signed the contract in 2014 with Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ, to run to April 2018.

At the same time, the nine workers, all with more than 13 years on the job, were informed they were subject to a 90-day trial period after which they could be dismissed. At the beginning of June, all nine were fired. About 15 new workers were brought in at the lower rate of pay.

Gabriel Rodriguez, a Bushburg representative told the media that, despite the halved pay, the new workers were asked “from time to time” to work a sixth day. “People are expected now, under this administration, to fulfill their jobs at 100 percent,” he said.

Two fires broke out in the 1711 building complex in the first week of June. The replacement workers had not removed mattresses from the hallways. Several residents suffered smoke inhalation and were sent to the hospital. Two broken elevators remained in disrepair, endangering elderly residents who are unable to use the stairs.

The law allows a new owner to discontinue the union contract. The only actions taken by 32BJ has been to file charges with the National Labor Relations Board, a process which can take years to resolve; and to hold a couple of small protests in front of the offices of the landlord in Borough Park, Brooklyn and at the apartment building, with supporters among the tenants.

In 2011, when the Flatbush Gardens complex, also in Brooklyn, locked out 70 handymen and porters who refused a pay cut of 30-40 percent, the 32BJ strategy of waiting for a court decision lasted 16 months, and the workers ended up with a 20 percent pay cut.

Lamont Starkey, laid off at 1711 Fulton, is a porter with 13 years on the job, and the father of two children. He told the WSWs, “The new manager said ‘we don’t do union,’ so they could cut our pay in half and even cut the 401(k) pension plan that we paid out of our pockets.”

Ronnie Coppage, a porter for 38 years, described the new management’s harassment: “They cut the pay from day one. They would walk around us while we were working, telling us we were too slow. We had some protection because by law they had to keep the building for 90 days, since it is a union. They said then they would get rid of us anyway. The company got rid of a manager because they did not get rid of us quick enough. The replacement workers are from a [homeless] shelter.

“We have a four-year contract until April 20, 2018. They just ignored the contract. The first day they got here, we didn’t even know who they were. No one had told us the building was bought. The first day they said ‘take it or leave it.’”

Lamont said, “Their plan is to make this a luxury building, to increase the rents two or three times. They said in five years, they will have the building the way

they want it. They don't even let the tenants use the community room, so the tenant association can't hold meetings. They have raised the parking rate from \$35 a month to \$100 a month. It is us first, then the tenants."

Willie Hill, the superintendent, explained, "They gave me 30 days to get out of my apartment. I did not get any documents yet. I have been here since 1985. I have four kids, a wife. I don't know what I am going to do. They said to me, 'We are going to make it hell for you.' I didn't have any idea that that meant we would all be out. They called me a piece of shit. I have it on video. I was told, 'You aren't going to make it. You may as well walk.'"

Garry Sparrow, a porter for 16 years: "The manager came up to me and called me a fat bastard and said I would never make 90 days. The management told the tenants that we walked out. They were verbally abusing us. If we were going to walk out, why didn't we walk out then? Why would we wait?"

Asked how they survive now, Ronnie said, "We have applied for public assistance, food stamps, unemployment. It could take months to get it. We are borrowing money from relatives. The company would rather put us on public assistance than have us working. The only assistance from the union is \$100 a week. That's all. We can't pay our bills on that. The union is trying to bring them to the table but they won't talk to the union. So the union took them to court."

Asked about support from the community, one worker replied, "Some people walking by stop and tell us they support us. Tenants are afraid for management to see them with us. There is a State Assemblywoman, Annette Robinson who lives across the street in one of the landlord's buildings. She isn't doing anything for us.

"They broke the contract—the union should have more people here. We are in this predicament today, but tomorrow it is going to happen to you. We've got to get together. If you don't stand up today, tomorrow you will fall."

Residents expressed concern over maintenance and rent increases. Some said things had improved only because it seemed the previous landlord was so bad. Others said that some repairs were being done in the hallways but not in apartments.

One tenant, James, said he plans to move out of the complex, where he has lived for 30 years, to

Pennsylvania. He intends to commute daily to his work at a Manhattan hospital. "None of the people here can afford it over here. They want to turn all this into condos. It will be cheaper for me to drive in, even from Pennsylvania."

Another resident remarked about the mass firings, "I think it's horrible. Four-bedroom apartments in the complex go for over \$2,200 a month and rising. Our rent went up in March. My thing is, we pay all this rent, and for what? They're not fixing any apartments."

1711 Fulton Street is part of the Mitchell-Lama state-subsidized, affordable housing program, but the building is eligible to opt out later this year. Bushburg is clearly planning to encourage tenants to leave and to renovate apartments so that they can be removed from rent regulation and leased at market rates. Many residents in the building receive federal Section 8 low-income rent subsidies and some, who had not signed leases, have already had their rent raised by hundreds of dollars.



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