

New York housing crisis impacts Brooklyn building workers and tenants

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The staggering growth of economic inequality in New York City has deepened the housing crisis for the city's working class. Rents are spiraling upward, consuming increasing proportions of workers' stagnant incomes and making it difficult for many to find a decent place to live. Record numbers are being made homeless, forced to live in shelters or on the street.

At the same time, real estate developers and landlords are employing ruthless tactics against building workers and tenants to clear the way for the construction of luxury housing for the wealthy. A specific case in point is 1711 Fulton Street, a 283-unit apartment building in the working class Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.

At the beginning of the year the building was purchased by Bushburg Properties for \$38 million. The firm has developed more than a half billion dollars in real estate over the past twenty years, including a new 28-story tower in downtown Brooklyn.

The Fulton Street building currently falls under the Mitchell-Lama federal housing program. Apartments are reserved for middle- and lower-income tenants through subsidies of owners' mortgage obligations. However, in the context of the city's current luxury housing boom, substantial profits are to be realized by clearing the existing occupants, renovating the building, and increasing the rents to "market rates" which are thousands of dollars a month. This would put the apartments completely out of reach of even higher-paid workers as well as many in the middle class.

The residents of 1711 Fulton fear the worst, since the building owner has the right to opt out of the federal subsidy program at the end of this year. Many of the tenants depend on "Section 8" federal income subsidies for housing. Some of them told WSWS reporters that the new landlord had immediately tried to raise the rents across the board, as well as taking other steps to force tenants out of the building.

One of the first measures taken to reorganize the property was to unilaterally cut the building's maintenance workers' wages from \$22 to \$12 an hour, and to take away all

benefits. This was done despite the fact that the workers were covered by an existing union contract between the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ and the previous owner.

After continuing to protest the landlord's takeaways, the nine workers were fired on June 1st. For three and a half months they manned a picket line in front of the building, each receiving only \$100 per week in strike pay from the union. As one worker told the WSWS, "You can't pay your bills with that."

A support rally held at the building on July 31 was attended by as many as a thousand other building workers, as well as tenants and some community residents. A laid-off porter complained, "At the rally a bunch of politicians spoke so they could say they were behind us. But they don't do anything."

While the workers were locked out, conditions in the building were allowed to deteriorate substantially, undoubtedly as part of the new owner's strategy aimed at driving out the tenants. A number of tenants described the ordeal to WSWS reporters.

Michelle Hill pointed to the large pile of plastic garbage bags near the building and said, "We live in a bunch of filth and rodents. It wasn't this bad before this landlord bought the building, but now you have a stench hitting you. The bins meant for the garbage are full, so they keep piling it up on the street. And mailbox doors are broken. People have to go to the Post Office. This is not because of vandalism; they are in disrepair. Mr. Steve, the manager, is very nasty, called us animals, and even used the 'N word'."

Zion Sandy, a high school student living in the building, commented, "My apartment has mold, which is spreading through the building. They need to plaster and paint the walls. I called management and it is almost a year now. It sounds like water running. They did a patch and then it falls off and there is water right away. It is like we live in the Titanic."

Michelle added, "I have a son with asthma. I called HPD [the city's Department of Housing Preservation and

Development] who came and wrote a violation. The management procrastinated and HPD gave another violation and finally HPD had someone sent to do repair.

“The building had a bad fire on the sixth floor in June because of mattresses that were left lying in the hallway. It is still not fixed up. For over a month and a half you could smell the soot.”

A tenant who lives on the sixth floor explained how asbestos was discovered during the fire cleanup, and men in protective suits were brought in to remove it. “From August 26, we had to spend a whole week in a hotel. There are still fumes under the brick that you can see. They discovered asbestos in that area, but we do not know what they did with it. We don’t know how much there is in the rest of the building.

“Since management took over, conditions in the building have gotten worse. We pay rent and we have many problems such as getting access to the parking lot. Sometimes we do not get hot water. Our civil rights are being violated. Complaining to management is difficult because they always tell us that they are in a meeting. I know what gentrification is. It feels like a terrorist attack. The mayor and the borough president have not responded. I am 69 years old and have to go back to work because the pension is not enough and the costs are too high.”

As a result of a lawsuit brought before the National Labor Relations Board, the management settled on August 31 rather than go to court to face charges of harassment and the firing of workers covered under an existing union contract. Their return to work was delayed until September 14.

Of the original eight porters and a superintendent, only five actually got their jobs back. The one porter able to immediately start work again was left to do the work of the original eight. “The union is asking for two more porters to be hired,” he said, “but that will leave five workers to do the work of the original nine.”

The building workers spoke with WSWs reporters about the contract while on the picket line. “We got a deal, but we are not all that happy with it.” The company insisted two workers will not be allowed back. One picketer said, “The union claimed they were willing to go to court for the two, but knew that when offered a choice by management of being fired or a buyout, they would take the buyout. They had 18 years and 25 years on the job. We were united. Everybody should go back with the same deal. The union talks about no takebacks but they are not taking back two workers.” The two reportedly expressed concerns for their safety if they returned.

Two picketers said the union had at first asked them to sign the agreement before they even saw it, but they did not want to. “The union at first wanted us to sign an agreement

that waived getting the back pay we are owed. We have families and children to take care of.” They have now been told that the substantial back wages owed them, as much as \$20,000, will be paid. They were also upset over the fact that the negotiations with management were carried out by the SEIU entirely behind their backs.

“This was a wake-up call for me,” one locked-out worker declared. “These are people with big money—the landlord, the union. The next step is people should look at the unions, what they are doing?”

Local 32BJ represents 70,000 maintenance workers, cleaners, doormen, and security officers in residential and commercial buildings, public schools, theaters and stadiums in New York City and Long Island. Overall the SEIU has almost three million dues-paying members, including healthcare workers, local and state government employees, and property service workers.

Despite this membership, the eight workers at 1711 Fulton were isolated for nine months and threatened with the loss of their livelihoods, and two of their coworkers are now left without a job. During the struggle, Secretary-treasurer Kyle Bragg of 32BJ told the DNAinfo website that “management is legally within its rights to reduce wages.”

In effect, the reinstatement of some of the fired workers and restitution of back pay is a minor annoyance for the building’s owner given the huge profits that will be realized once the existing tenants are driven out and their apartments rented at what the market will bring. This process is being repeated innumerable times throughout the city. The de Blasio administration’s feeble claims to address the housing crisis are nothing but a smokescreen to cover the virtually unchecked frenzy of luxury development while the crisis of affordable housing for the working class continues to worsen.

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