

Overcrowding in New York City Housing Authority fueled by lack of jobs and affordable apartments

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Amidst growing homelessness and soaring rent burdens facing millions of working class New Yorkers, the 400,000 tenants in the city's public housing developments would seem to have an advantage.

The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) administers more than 325 separate complexes, totaling about 175,000 apartments. Rents are no more than 30 percent of household monthly income. The population in public housing, about 90 percent African-American and Hispanic, comprises many of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

While it beats living on the street or in the city's notorious homeless shelters, New York's housing projects have their own serious challenges. Tenants try for months and sometimes years to obtain basic repairs in buildings that are decades old, in most cases dating from the 1950s and 1960s. After many years of state and federal budget cuts, NYCHA has a massive \$17 billion in unmet capital needs. The housing projects in which many of the city's working people and working poor live are being allowed to crumble.

Despite all of this, such is the crisis of affordable housing in this city of billionaires and multimillionaires that an additional estimated 100,000 to 200,000 "off the books" tenants have squeezed into the approximately 175,000 units administered by NYCHA.

These people, in many cases the children or other relatives of existing tenants, must tread very carefully lest they be discovered and face eviction or other penalties. Most of them are working, and trying to save up for an apartment of their own, where a single bathroom does not have to be shared between four or five people and where they are not forced to sleep in the living room or on a folding cot. In many cases, however, weeks stretch into months and even into years, as the city's housing becomes more and more unaffordable, even for those making \$40,000 or even \$50,000 annually.

The situation is even worse for these tenants who have a poor credit rating, and especially for the many who have criminal records after having been caught up in the notorious "war on drugs" and the consequent mass imprisonment, which disproportionately affected African-American and other minority youth.

In a recent feature on this situation, the online magazine *Slate*

explains that the "illegal" tenants are often called "ghost tenants." As one commenter on *Slate*'s website observes, this is a term that applies more logically to the billionaires who have bought high rise apartments in midtown Manhattan as investments or as prestige *pieds -a-tierre* which they visit perhaps once or twice a year. The most expensive sale for an individual apartment was for more than \$100 million, for a penthouse on West 57th Street.

The NYCHA's Amsterdam Houses, where a young woman interviewed for the *Slate* article lives, is less than half a mile away, next to the Lincoln Center performing arts complex. The image—of the actual "ghost" apartments barely a 10-minute walk from the deteriorating conditions facing low-paid workers—aptly sums up the irrationality and oppression of capitalism in the 21st century.

City authorities dispute the suggestion that as many as 200,000 additional tenants, 50 percent over the official total, are living in NYCHA buildings. There is little argument, however, that, as one official stated, "We acknowledge that there are likely more people residing in our developments than accounted for by our official tally."

The phenomenon of people crowding into these apartments is not new, and has to some extent tracked the state of the economy. Today, eight years after the 2008 crash and amidst the virtual disappearance of decent-paying jobs even for many college graduates, it is probably higher than it has ever been. Observers who have studied housing in New York consider 100,000 additional residents to be a low estimate.

How does the city government under Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio intend to deal with the housing crisis and the problems of the city public housing in particular? According to a column last month by Ginia Bellafante in the *New York Times*, the mayor's office suggests, in the columnist's words, that public housing "could become an attractive beneficiary of charitable money." The city government has created a nonprofit "Fund for Public Housing," with the aim of raising \$200 million over the next three years.

This scheme follows earlier proposals by de Blasio to deal with NYCHA's enormous fiscal shortfall. These include plans to lease some ground-floor space to retailers, cut staff, offer parking spaces to nonresidents at market rates, and carve out sections of public housing property (Bellafante calls this "poorly used land") for

development by the real estate industry.

These plans to partially privatize public housing are only part of what the de Blasio administration has in mind. It promises a very inadequate total of 200,000 new or renovated housing units over the next decade, and much of this hinges on a forthcoming proposal, being discussed by the City Council, that would rezone a large area of Brooklyn for the benefit of the real estate industry, as long as it promises a meager percentage of “affordable housing” in return.

As for NYCHA, the authorities are well aware that wealthy would-be philanthropists—multimillionaires who put their names on new hospital wings and university buildings—may not be enthusiastic about public housing. “... [D]onors are often prompted to give when there is an emotional narrative to which they can respond,” writes Bellafante, “and drab, monolithic buildings don’t easily move people.”

NYCHA chairwoman Shola Olatoye even declared—in answer to the idea “that buildings might be renamed to honor the most magnanimous donors”—that “all options are on the table.” The idea is one of appealing to the top 1 percent in their own self-interest. The pitch that de Blasio and his administration intend to make includes the warning that they are sitting on a powder keg, and an explosion will put the vast fortunes of the super-rich at risk.

The actual conditions of life of millions of workers in the wealthiest city of the world, almost a decade after the Wall Street Crash of 2008, are finding expression in a growing political awareness among workers and youth.

De Blasio was put in office precisely to appease the anger of the working class without challenging the dictates of the ruling elite. The deep crisis of the capitalist system that he represents means that he has no genuine reforms to offer; on the contrary. The mayor can only come up with proposals that amount to chipping away at public housing itself, either in the form of direct handouts to private developers, or appeals for philanthropic donations that will wind up making the families in public housing even more directly beholden to the super-rich.

WSWS reporters spoke to residents at the Ingersoll Houses in Brooklyn. Leona, who lives in this development along with her mother, explained that it wasn’t until this past year that the building they live in was brought up to code. Still, many repairs are badly needed. “They could spend money on fixing up the outside, the doors, the intercom system which never worked. Sometimes the buildings won’t get cleaned very often as they should be. It can get really messy out here. There’s trash all around on the grass outside the building. Meanwhile I see they put up these security floodlights at night while everything else is falling apart. I have no idea what the hell is going on.”

On the issue of overcrowding, Leona said that while she had no direct information, it is the norm for large families of three generations to all live in one apartment. She also pointed to the lack of alternatives for the working class in the neighborhood, where one bedroom apartments go for an average of \$3,001 per month, according to the real estate firm MNS. “They keep making these luxury apartments for people moving from Manhattan, but it’s the same thing here now,” Leona stated. “Everyone is moving out because they can’t afford it. Right now me and my mom are

actually making plans to move to New Jersey. My mom would like to stay close because she works by the [adjacent] Navy Yard, but I want to get out of the city.”

On the report of de Blasio appealing for private funds to help public housing, Leona responded, “It shouldn’t be voluntary. Politicians always talk about how America is great but we’re screwing up with so many things: health care, infrastructure, housing. But for the rich it’s all about money. They don’t give a crap as long as they make money. Public health should be the number one concern.

“Countries and governments that did not take care of their people did not last very long,” she added. “That was the whole point of the French Revolution. The government didn’t take care of the people. It should be a national law to have the rich pay their fair share of taxes. End of story. They complain that they don’t want to lose money but they have more money then they know what to do with it anyway. Put it towards something that counts.”

Two youth, Darren and Jay, listed many upkeep problems in their buildings at Ingersoll. “It’s terrible. We’ve had no hot water,” Jay said. “Sometimes no heat when it’s cold outside. The elevator would be broken for a long time. They only come to fix things when they feel like it.”

Darren remarked, “The walls need repainting. When we take a shower sometimes there’s no hot water.”

Ronald, a long-time resident, offered his thoughts on de Blasio’s plan to raise funds from wealthy donors. “It won’t work. Look at how NYCHA was created. It was the federal, state and city government. The private sector wanted no part of it. Why would people donate money if they’re not going to make a profit off it? It’s the same with the transit system, the infrastructure, the post office.” He added that if de Blasio is successful in soliciting donations, it will be because he is promising something in return.

As for overcrowding and doubling up in apartments, he said, “I do know it goes on. People don’t want to live in shelters. What do you expect them to do? Live on the street? Many people can’t find jobs. Others may have other types of problems.

“The working class is being eliminated. Health care is being taken away from minorities. Abortion clinics are being closed down. Look at the last 10 years. People in the middle income have been wiped out. ...They don’t care about where all the poor people go. They don’t care about people who have been here 50 or 60 years.”



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