

Six-week-old baby girl dies in Brooklyn elevator tragedy

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Last Thursday, an elevator malfunction in a high-rise apartment building in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn led to the death of a baby girl and serious injury to her mother. The accident happened when the mother, Aber Al-Rahabi, 21, with her baby, 6-week-old Areej Ali, were waiting for the elevator on the 23rd floor of 3415 Neptune Avenue.

The doors opened and they entered, not realizing that the elevator car was not in position, but stuck between the 22nd and 23rd floors. Both mother and baby fell 6 to 8 feet onto the roof of the car, which then dropped precipitously to the 15th floor. The infant died at the scene and her mother was hospitalized. The two had moved to the US only a few months ago to be with the baby's father.

The 24-story building in which the incident occurred, known as Sea Rise II, is part of the Bay Park II housing complex, composed of three buildings, with a total of 338 apartments. It is privately owned by the Starrett Corporation, a major New York landlord. The complex was built in the 1970s as a state-assisted affordable housing development and receives federal Section 8 housing subsidies. It was severely impacted by Hurricane Sandy, and is notorious for the abysmal conditions under which working class tenants are forced to live while the owners reap massive benefits from government programs.

New York City's mayor, Democrat Bill de Blasio, characterized the cause of the accident as "a painful mystery." It is nothing of the sort.

The *Daily News* quotes one relative of the victims as stating, "The elevators (were) never working properly. (The building owners) don't even care. To them, there's not human beings inside the elevators."

This building alone has been cited by the New York City Department of Buildings (DOB) for 45 elevator-

related violations since 2000, demonstrating a chronic and criminal failure on the part of the owner to undertake proper maintenance. The complex as a whole has had 159 elevator-related violations since 1994, 31 still unresolved, not to mention numerous other problems, including at least 50 building code violations, according to the DOB.

The ineffectiveness of the city's inspection program is exemplified by the fact that, according to de Blasio, "This particular elevator had been tested twice this year and had passed, and there is nothing we found so far that tells us why this happened in such an aberrant way." However, there was a still active (i.e., unresolved) complaint pertaining to this specific elevator dating back as recently as September 30, less than two weeks before the accident. Another complaint, made in March of 2015, stated that the elevator was "constantly getting out of service" and, at the time, had not been working for two and a half weeks.

This type of accident has a long history in the Bay Park complex. A tenant told the *New York Times* that a friend of his was killed in a similar incident in the same building in 1991.

The only rational conclusion that can be drawn from this pattern is that the city's inspections are pro forma, leading to temporary, cosmetic repairs at best, while allowing the landlord to continue reaping substantial profits by undertaking minimal maintenance.

The Starrett Corporation is a major New York real estate firm. According to its web site, "The Starrett portfolio is comprised of both market as well as government-assisted multifamily properties containing in excess of 7000 apartment units. The current strategy of Starrett is to create additional value by implementing a strategy to: (i) increase profitability through intensive management and capital improvement programs; and

(ii) where possible, reconfigure and expand certain properties or construct additional buildings, by utilizing unused but available land and development rights.”

In other words, Starrett seeks to extract as much profit as it can out of existing properties, many with low-income tenants and that receive government subsidies, by spending as little as possible on maintenance, characterized as “intensive management,” while doing nothing with respect to “capital improvement programs.” But, as the real estate market tightens, it redevelops such properties into “market rate” residences, thus making even more profit.

This process of gentrification is a citywide phenomenon that has greatly intensified in recent years, with the active support of both Republican and Democratic administrations, via tax breaks and other giveaways. As a result, rents have skyrocketed and working class residents have been put under ever-increasing economic stress, being driven into ever more peripheral areas or onto the streets.

Mayor de Blasio was elected promising to fight economic inequality, the so-called “Tale of Two Cities.” However, under his administration the housing crisis has only worsened. Symptomatic of the extreme lack of affordable housing was the recent achievement of a historic milestone in homelessness. The official tally of people spending the night in the city’s horrific homeless shelters reached a new all-time record of over 60,000, not including thousands more living “in the rough.” De Blasio’s supposed efforts to address the housing crisis, such as “mandatory inclusionary housing,” amount to no more than a continuation and expansion of programs that provide major benefits to the real estate industry, but result in continually worsening conditions for the working class.

The death of young Areej Ali is one result of these policies.



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