

New York Mayor de Blasio covered up for city's failure to test for lead contamination in public housing

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The newly re-elected administration of New York Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio has acknowledged that it knew for more than a year that the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) had failed to conduct legally required lead paint inspections in thousands of its apartments. NYCHA public housing complexes spread throughout the city are home to 400,000 mostly working class tenants.

The failure by NYCHA to perform inspections of its apartments for lead contamination, required under both federal and local laws, began in 2012 under the previous administration of Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg. It was brought to the attention of City Hall in April of 2016. The mayor himself was specifically informed of the violation by the NYCHA chairwoman, Shola Olatoye, in July 2016. However, with hundreds of thousands of people at risk, this information was withheld from the public for over a year, during which time de Blasio conducted his re-election campaign.

It has further been revealed that in 2016 the NYCHA chairwoman certified that the Authority was in compliance with the inspection regulations when, in fact, she was aware of violations dating back four years. Falsification of required certification to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development of compliance with federal regulations regarding testing for lead could be the basis for perjury charges.

De Blasio, without acknowledging his own responsibility for the cover-up, has fired or demoted three staff, not including Olatoye, whom he appointed in 2014. The mayor continues to express “full confidence” in Olatoye despite her false certification.

Lead, a heavy metal, is extremely dangerous if taken into the human body, even in minute quantities, causing potentially severe neurological damage, which can result in learning impairments and behavioral problems, especially in children. High doses can lead to kidney damage, seizures, or even death. The effects, which vary with dosage, are

permanent. The occurrence of lead contamination, which was recently highlighted by the drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan, is actually widespread in the United States, principally due to the use of lead in paint in homes before it was banned in 1978.

The use of lead-based paint, discontinued in residential housing in New York City in 1960, remains a serious problem in older buildings. Young children may ingest lead by eating contaminated paint chips that fall from fragmenting surfaces. People of any age can intake lead by inhaling or ingesting dust containing lead paint particles produced by wear and tear, such as the opening and closing of lead-painted doors and windows.

NYCHA estimates that at least 55,000 of its apartments are likely to contain lead-based paint. Occupants include 4,231 children under the age of six, in whom the effects of lead poisoning are most severe. NYCHA has repeatedly downplayed findings of lead contamination in its apartments and made only limited efforts to address the problem once identified, conducting lead abatement in some apartments while leaving others in the same building untouched, for example.

The Authority has been under investigation by the Manhattan US Attorney's civil division since at least 2015 for possible false claims regarding health and safety, including lead paint contamination. In March 2016, court filings by the US Attorney indicated problems with NYCHA's lead paint inspections. At the time, de Blasio downplayed the issue, stating “We have a very aggressive inspection and abatement program and that is certainly being carried out in the Housing Authority and has been for years.” Both he and senior NYCHA officials knew that was untrue.

On Monday, de Blasio stated, “There was no attempt to deceive.” Evincing the height of hypocrisy, he went on to claim, “Thank God there has not been harm done to any child because of mistakes that were made.”

The city's own Department of Investigation (DOI) has accused NYCHA of "systemic mismanagement ... that puts tenants at risk" regarding the false reporting of lead paint inspections as well as a number of other violations of mandated procedures, such as checking smoke detectors and proper elevator maintenance.

In 2016, the *New York Daily News* reported that in 133 NYCHA apartments, "202 children "associated" with public housing apartments since 2011 had tested positive for higher-than-acceptable blood-lead levels." The city claims lower numbers.

Following years of funding cuts, NYCHA suffers from substantial budget shortfalls, resulting in huge backlogs in routine maintenance and repairs. Tenants have long complained of delays extending to months or even years in addressing serious problems such as leaking pipes causing the extensive spread of mold, a significant health hazard. The suspension of lead paint inspections was reportedly due to NYCHA's redirecting limited resources in an attempt to deal with these other problems.

Information regarding the horrendous conditions in NYCHA housing, including dangerous peeling paint, was given to a WSWs reporting team by residents of the Baruch Houses, a NYCHA complex on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was built during the 1950s, before the use of lead paint was discontinued in the city.

Christopher Lopez spoke while picking up his children from a pre-kindergarten school. He was home during the day because of a disability suffered in his Sanitation Department job. He said, "Just last week we had an inspection for peeling paint. We never had one before. It sucks, especially for kids. My four children are ages 4 to 11. A lot of people do their own painting because by the time they come, it is too long. I do my own plastering.

"If the housing management tells you they are going to fix something it takes a long time and effort by the tenant. They told me they were going to fix my floors. Then it was two or three years and then they said it was closed, that they did not have it listed in the system. I had to call the NYCHA management for the whole Borough of Manhattan to finally get it done. They do budget cuts for housing, then the workers here don't get the materials they need on time.

"They are more interested in privatizing the projects. In Baruch, they want to put a building with condominiums in the parking lots here.

"It takes two incomes for us to pay our \$1100 rent here," he added.

Kimberly Ortiz, a Baruch resident for 14 years said, "I hear people complaining that they don't do the repairs or they just patch the wall, put a piece of cardboard-like brown panel in the wall. We decided it is better to do our own

painting and plastering in our apartment. My husband also fixes the apartment, broken things, leaks. We do not get reimbursed."

Louis Pena told the WSWs, "I have lived in many public projects and my mother lives in the Marcy Houses in Brooklyn since the '80s. They do not scrape away the old paint. They always just repaint over it. I never saw them do more. It is horrible, especially for the kids. Maintenance and repair are horrible."

The problem of lead poisoning in New York City is not restricted to NYCHA housing. A decade-long study of lead exposure reported by Reuters revealed that the percentage of children with elevated blood lead levels in 69 census tracts were higher than those in Flint, Michigan, where the water supply had been severely contaminated. Ten percent of the young children tested were found to have elevated lead levels, twice the rate in Flint. The study found that a substantial contributor to the increased lead exposure in New York was lax enforcement of housing regulations relating to lead paint in privately owned residential real estate.

The cover-up by Democrat de Blasio of the city's failure to test for lead in paint exposes the cynicism and hypocrisy of his claim to be a progressive. The egregiousness of this act is exacerbated by the fact that a 2004 city housing law targeting landlords who failed to comply with lead inspection regulations was co-sponsored by de Blasio when he was a city councilman from Brooklyn. The stated aim of the law was the "elimination" of childhood lead poisoning within six years, by 2010.

In Flint, New York City and across the US, the ruling class, through both its Democratic and Republican representatives, has failed to address, and indeed actively covered up, this major health crisis affecting the working class. Thousands of children will be permanently impaired due to these criminal acts.



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