

# Tenants sue New York City Housing Authority over horrific conditions

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Conditions at New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing complexes, home to more than 400,000 New Yorkers, have been deteriorating for decades due to extreme underfunding. In recent months, two egregious situations—failure to properly inspect and address widespread lead paint contamination, and widespread loss of heat and hot water during bitterly cold periods this winter—have pushed residents’ anger to the boiling point.

This has led the Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP), representing tenants’ associations at the 326 individual NYCHA complexes, to initiate a lawsuit against the Authority. The suit seeks to have a court-appointed, independent monitor oversee NYCHA’s operations.

NYCHA was once seen as an example of relatively successful public housing, providing decent and affordable residences for a significant section of the city’s working class population. However, in recent decades, as part of the ruling class’s general attack on all social programs, substantial cuts in government funding for housing have caused severe reductions in repair and maintenance, resulting in steadily deteriorating living conditions. This has occurred even as the city’s wealthy elite has grown ever richer, under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Tenants have been forced to wait months or even years for critical repairs, such as fixing leaking pipes. Among the consequences are apartments with extensive mold growth, creating unhealthy conditions, especially for those residents with asthma. Tenants have complained for years, to no avail, about these and other chronic problems that have made many apartments virtually unlivable.

NYCHA has a documented record of deception regarding repairs. In 2013, it had a backlog of 420,000 open repair tickets. By early 2015, the Authority reported that the total had been reduced to 120,000. However, an audit by City Comptroller Scott Stringer found that much of this reduction had been accomplished by bookkeeping trickery, without actually accomplishing the needed repairs.

A settlement in a 2013 class action suit required NYCHA to repair mold problems within a week, or 15 days for complex problems. Numerous news stories report tenants’ complaints that these deadlines are widely ignored. At times, the “repairs” consist of a new coat of paint.

The two abovementioned crises, involving heat and hot water and lead paint contamination, above have brought the deteriorating

situation at NYCHA to a head.

Last fall, it was revealed that NYCHA officials had suspended mandated lead paint inspections for nearly four years, then falsifying reports regarding compliance. NYCHA even failed to notify tenants of the hazard in their apartments once identified. Recent inspections found that more than half of 4,200 apartments inspected for possible lead paint and children under 6 had peeling or damaged paint.

Lead is a significant health hazard, especially for young children, who can suffer irreversible neurological damage if they ingest paint chips or inhale dust containing lead. The use of lead in paint was discontinued decades ago, but it is still present in older buildings. Its devastating effects have been highlighted by the recent crisis caused by lead-contaminated water in Flint, Michigan.

Senior NYCHA officials, as well as Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, at first sought to cover up or belittle the significance of the situation, and later attributed it to a failure in communication. When it became an open scandal, scapegoats were sacrificed. Three officials resigned and one was demoted, though the authority chair, Shola Olatoye, remains in office. Recently, a federal judge denied a request by tenants for the appointment of an independent monitor to supervise lead paint inspections.

The aging and deteriorated state of the infrastructure in many of the NYCHA complexes was brought into sharp relief during this winter, which featured several episodes of extremely cold temperatures. According to the Authority’s own figures, between October 1 and January 22, 143,000 apartments, representing more than 80 percent of residents, lacked heat and hot water for periods averaging 48 hours, many for much longer. The problem with NYCHA’s heating infrastructure is not new, and has worsened. Episodes of lost heat were reported 1,360 times in 2016, jumping to 2,395 last year. The increase in hot water outages was even more dramatic—from 916 in 2016 to 4,112 in 2017.

In response to the anger among residents over the failure to reliably provide these most basic necessities, Mayor de Blasio announced a proposal to replace 39 boilers in 104 NYCHA buildings with approximately 45,000 residents, barely a tenth of the total. The necessary \$200 million must be approved by the City Council at a time of tight budgets. Even if the money is made available, the project would not be completed until the end of 2022, nearly four years from now, assuming the projected schedule is met. This would leave tens of thousands of residents to suffer several more winters with unreliable heat and hot water. For the

many elderly and infirm people living in NYCHA housing, such conditions can be life-threatening.

The need for such a massive project shows the extreme backlog in what should have been a schedule of routine repair and replacement of boilers which are well past their projected use life. A bill is currently under consideration in the state legislature that would give NYCHA the ability to enter into “design-build” contracts, which supposedly would reduce the time for project completion by a year. Such contracts are highly lucrative for contractors and represent another way in which public money is being transferred to the private sector, with reduced oversight, on work that should have been done decades ago.

WSWS reporters visited the Woodside Houses, a NYCHA complex in the borough of Queens, to discuss conditions there. One resident, Melissa Castillo described the state of her apartment due to the lack of maintenance.

“I have a disabled daughter. In my apartment the walls are coming apart. The whole wall is peeling. I literally have to clean it up every day. There may be mold in the walls. I have been trying for a year to get them fixed. The refrigerator broke and they gave me a used part, not a new piece. It used to be that when I called, maintenance came. Now it is like chasing a wild goose. The workers give all kinds of excuses. I think the work is contracted out. There is no emergency service. My bathroom flooded the whole house. Maintenance said it would take 24 hours before they could come. I had to go to Home Depot myself to fix it. But my rent went up, practically doubled last year.”

Melissa and her husband pay \$1,800 per month for a two-bedroom apartment.

Another resident, Colleen, also spoke of the lack of maintenance: “It’s terrible, they don’t fix anything. When they do actually come, they will only fix what they have a ticket for. They used to take care of everything, now everything has been contracted out. As for the heat, my apartment is always too hot; I have to open the window, but my sister who lives in that building has skin cancer and it’s always freezing cold. During that big storm we had no heat most of the day.”

Marylin described the rapid deterioration she has experienced during recent years: “It used to be beautiful here. We’ve been here for 40 years. It used to be a beautiful place when we moved in. I would say it started really going downhill five to seven years ago. Now it has hit rock bottom. They used to clean the halls and elevators, now people do it themselves but not everyone does it. Outside there’s garbage on the floor and no one picks it up. The paint is peeling and things are broken. No one in charge seems to care. This is one of the better NYCHA projects, but it’s gotten bad. My sister lives in Ravenswood and it’s worse there.”

The CCOP lawsuit, even if it achieves its stated goal of establishing a token monitor to oversee NYCHA, will do nothing to address the underlying cause of the horrendous conditions in which residents must live—namely, the massive underfunding of necessary maintenance and upgrades.

The city’s solution is to raise funds by creeping privatization. This includes allowing private developers to undertake new construction of market rate buildings in open space within existing complexes—space that was an integral part of the original design to

provide residents with a livable environment—effectively turning the older buildings into the equivalent of “poor door” apartments.

Alternatively, whole complexes are being “leased” to private developers who will renovate them, with the clear if officially unstated goal of ultimately transforming them into “market rate” residences, driving out the existing, working class tenants.

In a city where residential rents continue to skyrocket and more than 60,000 people spend each night in homeless shelters, with thousands more living “in the rough,” the city’s “solution” to the NYCHA crisis will only result in many more people becoming homeless.

The problems at NYCHA are not isolated. Rather, they are but one aspect of the extreme social and economic inequality brought on by the crisis of capitalism. As part of the ruling class’s campaign to severely reduce or destroy all social programs, the Trump administration has announced its intention to eliminate a whole series of housing-related programs, including the Public Housing Capital and Operating Funds, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), Section 4 Capacity Building for Community Development and Affordable Housing, Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program, and the HOME Program.

No amount of “oversight” or better communication with tenants will prevent the continuing deterioration of housing conditions for working class families at NYCHA or anywhere else in the city. Appeals to de Blasio, Governor Cuomo, or any part of the capitalist political establishment will yield only token results, at best.

NYCHA residents should form their own neighborhood committees, independent of both the Democrats and Republicans. These committees should reach out to other sections of workers to prepare and conduct a united struggle based on a socialist program. Only a workers’ government implementing socialist policies can provide decent, affordable housing for all.



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