

Health risks found in over 80 percent of NYCHA apartments

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A recently released report documents a fact that more than 400,000 residents of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing complexes already know only too well—conditions in the great majority of apartments endanger the health of their occupants. The New York State Department of Health (DOH) examined a sample of 255 apartments distributed across 23 developments. Of these, 212, over 83 percent, were found to have “at least one severe condition” that “could pose a health hazard.”

Among the conditions observed were peeling paint, mold, damaged plaster, rodents, insects, inoperable appliances and malfunctioning smoke detectors. Sixteen units had “severe” electrical hazards, and 15 had no heat. In addition, three quarters of the 64 common areas that were inspected had at least one health hazard. For years, NYCHA tenants have complained that they often have to wait months or even years for repairs, which are sometimes of a purely cosmetic nature.

This report follows two scandalous situations that made headlines in recent months. The first was the revelation that NYCHA officials had for years suspended legally mandated inspections for lead paint and then covered up this failure in official reports, prompting legal action by the federal government. Compounding the problem, the city recently announced that new testing of a sample of apartments has now revealed high lead levels in complexes that had previously been exempted from annual lead paint inspections based on a survey conducted in the 1990s, indicating that the potential for lead poisoning, especially of children, is even more widespread than previously thought.

The second incident was the widespread loss of heat and hot water by more than 300,000 tenants during

extremely cold weather this past winter due to obsolete and poorly maintained boilers, some dating back to the 1940s (see: “Tenants sue New York City Housing Authority over horrific conditions”). Funding cuts in recent years have reduced the boiler maintenance staff by more than a third, from 391 in 2013 to about 248 currently. This is for an agency that is responsible for 175,000 apartments in over 2,400 buildings distributed among 326 complexes spread throughout the city.

In response to the suffering caused by the failure by the NYCHA to provide heat and hot water, the non-profit Legal Aid Society has filed a lawsuit against the Authority, demanding up to \$15 million in rent rebates to affected tenants. This is in addition to a lawsuit previously initiated by the Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP), representing tenants associations, which demands that an independent monitor be appointed to oversee repairs at NYCHA facilities.

Another recent study, based on a poll of more than 200 NYCHA tenants, found that 59 percent reported mold in their apartments and 72 percent of these said that the Authority had failed to complete repairs. The NYCHA recently agreed to appoint an ombudsman who will intervene on behalf of tenants who have unaddressed mold problems.

Amid this escalating crisis, the head of the NYCHA, Shola Olatoye, a protégé of Mayor Bill de Blasio, who had been in her position since the beginning of his administration, has announced her resignation. Several lower-ranking officials had previously resigned or been reassigned. Olatoye had maintained her position, however, with de Blasio’s support, even after it was revealed that she had signed off on a report stating that lead paint inspections had been carried out, when they had not (see: “New York Mayor de Blasio covered up for city’s failure to test for lead contamination in public

housing”). She had previously refused to apologize for either the lead paint or loss-of-heat incidents.

Recently, in part as a consequence of the lead paint issue, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) imposed restrictions on the NYCHA that required it to get specific approval before drawing on federal funds for individual projects.

For months, de Blasio and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, both Democrats, have been hurling increasingly pointed accusations at each other over who is responsible for these horrific conditions and whose proposed schemes, both totally inadequate, will fix the problems. Despite denials by the mayor, it is likely that Olatoye’s resignation is an attempt by de Blasio to deflect criticism in this acrimonious and meaningless controversy. Neither side is prepared to address the true scale of the problem.

A major component of proposals from all sides—federal, state, and city, as well as the presidents of the tenants associations—focuses on greater oversight, based on the premise that the problems at the NYCHA are primarily the result of a failure in administration. This is a diversion from the fundamental cause, namely the decades of cuts in funding to what was once considered a major success in public housing in the US. Since 2000, federal funding for repairs alone has been cut by 53 percent, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

In a grandstanding move, Cuomo held a news conference earlier this month at an NYCHA complex in Harlem to declare a “state of emergency,” pledging \$250 million for repairs, streamlining the process for hiring outside contractors, and announced that a monitor would be appointed to oversee the work. De Blasio has offered \$200 million for emergency repairs. These amounts are totally inadequate, even if the funds actually materialize. Due to decades of budget cuts and resulting declines in maintenance, repairs and replacement of outdated infrastructure, the current estimate for necessary repairs is at least \$20 billion, possibly as much as \$27 billion.

The conditions faced by NYCHA residents are especially notable because of the concentration and numbers of people involved, but they are not unique. The severe inequality that exists in the US, and the drive by the ruling elite to dismantle all social services, is expressed in, among other things, the acute lack of

decent, affordable housing and resulting homelessness. The extremely cold weather that exposed the deteriorated condition of heating infrastructure in NYCHA complexes this past winter impacted working class people across the country (see: “America’s poor and homeless freeze in winter storm”).

That NYCHA residents are forced to live under such conditions is truly criminal. They are the result of decades of severe underfunding of this sprawling system of working class housing by every level of government, while at the same time the wealth of the city’s elite has grown astronomically. For both the Democrats and Republicans, this wealth is sacrosanct and cannot be touched. Instead, the city is moving toward the destruction of public housing by creeping privatization of the NYCHA (see: “Indebted New York City Housing Authority plans to lease public housing land to private developers”).

The city has already transferred 1,395 units to private control under HUD’s Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program and has a 10-year plan to convert a total of 15,000 units. Even in its initial stages, RAD has resulted in complaints from tenants regarding illegal rent increases, evictions and other abuses.

This process will inevitably result in throwing additional hundreds of thousands of working class residents onto the already completely inadequate “affordable housing” market, driving rents up even further, and increasing the city’s huge homeless population.



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