

# New York City public housing residents in the South Bronx without heat for a decade

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Residents of South Bronx Area Site 402, a New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) housing complex, have gone without heat for a decade. Site 402 is among the most egregious examples of the widespread loss of heat and hot water confronted by residents of public housing complexes during the winter months throughout the city.

The physical state of NYCHA housing has deteriorated dramatically due to the starvation of funds from the federal, state, and local governments. Significantly, legal requirements that landlords provide heat and hot water in private residences do not extend to city owned housing.

In addition to lost heat and hot water, NYCHA residents must also deal with lead paint, leaks, mold, broken elevators, rat and roach infestations and year-long waits for basic repairs.

While the supposedly progressive Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio, now in his second term, pledged to fight rapidly growing inequality, homelessness has continued to rise with over 60,000 people sleeping in the New York City shelter system and thousands more remaining on the streets. Millions of working-class and middle-class residents have been pushed to the limit by rising rents, and stories of families doubling up in apartment buildings or being evicted from their lifelong homes are all too common. Despite the often untenable and unhealthy living conditions, over 200,000 New Yorkers are listed on the waitlist for admission to NYCHA housing.

Tenants report waiting months or years for crucial repairs such as leaking pipes and water damage, the consequences of which include chronic health issues related to mold inhalation. In 2016, a report by Manhattan US Attorney's civil division exposed that for nearly a decade the city had suspended lead paint

inspection, falsifying compliance reports and failing to notify tenants of the toxic contamination in their homes, putting thousands of children at risk of poisoning. De Blasio was informed of the falsification but suppressed the information for one year while he ran for re-election.

In the winter months, NYCHA's deteriorating conditions are thrown into even sharper relief. Last winter, NYCHA's records revealed that 142,000 apartments—a figure representing roughly 80 percent of NYCHA residents—went without heat for average periods of 48 hours at some point between October 1 and January 22. In addition, over 159,740 apartments experienced hot water outages over the same period.

South Bronx Area Site 402 is comprised of four buildings, each housing approximately one hundred residents. Resident's complaints about the heating problems have been routinely ignored by building management. A NYCHA representative told the *New York Times* in December that after a decade of problems heating pipes in the complex would be replaced some time this winter.

WSWS reporters recently spoke to residents about the decade long heat outage in their homes.

One resident, Nayomi, who works in Manhattan as a nanny, has lived in one of the buildings for four years.

"We have been without heat the whole time we've lived here," she explained. "I have to use three electric heaters for the four rooms in the apartment. I use one for a few minutes and pass it to my sister to heat up her room. The electric bill is so high. And even then, the apartment is never warm enough. The floor is always cold. It makes me sad because I have two young children who have to deal with the cold all day long."

In addition to the lack of heat, Nayomi and her family must cope with a mold problem. "We did get some

repairs. They painted over the mold and did some plastering work, but it is not a solution that lasts very long. My little cousin who lives with us is always getting sick, even in the summer, and we think it's from the mold."

Sabrina stopped to talk as she was walking home with her young son. "I have one electric heater for two rooms but the electricity is expensive so I only heat and use half the apartment. We have to pay for electricity ourselves. It is also dangerous to use space heaters. I worry every night in bed about that, but we have no choice."

Sabrina also explained that her entire building had no gas from early October to the end of November. "The city gave us each a little hot plate. They wouldn't give us more because they said it was dangerous. I've lived here for two years and the conditions are terrible, but I have to stick with it because it's all I can afford. Sometimes I think my son still thinks we live in a shelter."

Carleton, a plasterer, visits his niece, Samantha, in her apartment in the South Bronx Area Site 402 residence. Each time he visits he makes repairs that the city has not addressed properly. Carleton also mentioned the months without gas and explained that the hot water is never reliable.

"The hot water is back on today. But it was out for two days. We were boiling water for showers for two days. This happens all winter long. We never know when the water will be out. September rolls around and we know we will have hot water and heat problems again."

Samantha joined Carleton in the hallway. She said, "I have one heater, but the Con Edison bill—I can't afford it. And we need to use the oven for more heat and that gas costs too much money too. And yes, it is dangerous. We use the oven to heat. We know it's dangerous but we have to do it. I hate it. You do go to sleep some nights and think, what if there is a fire? Still, some days the temperature inside is almost the same as outside."

Carleton added, "The city doesn't care about us. The politicians don't care about us. The city has the money to give Amazon billions of dollars." Carleton joked, "Can I get a billion dollars? I'll just take a million, that's fine."

But not even a dollar is forthcoming for the needs of

NYCHA's residents. The recent threats of a federal take over of NYCHA housing by Housing and Urban Development (HUD) would provide woefully inadequate funding and pave the way for a full privatization, placing all NYCHA residents in danger of eviction.

With or without a federal takeover, De Blasio has indicated plans for increased privatization of NYCHA housing. His NextGen initiative leases public housing land to private developers for the construction of market-rate apartments, a "solution" that does not benefit a majority of New Yorkers, but continues to funnel state and federal funds to the already bursting real estate industry.

The deterioration of New York City public housing is just part of nearly 40 years of a social-counterrevolution by the ruling class, destroying social programs fought for and won by the working class in an earlier period. In New York City, as in much of the rest of the United States, a tipping point is rapidly being reached as it becomes impossible for large sections of the working-class even to live.



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