

De Blasio's solution to New York's public housing crisis: Tear it down

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To paraphrase a notorious statement by a US general during the Vietnam War, 'In order to save public housing, you have to destroy it.' This barbaric philosophy, carried out by US imperialism more recently on a massive scale against cities in Iraq and Syria, is now brought home as part of the war on the American working class.

In the latest 'solution' to the abysmal conditions in New York City's public housing system (the New York City Housing Authority, or NYCHA), home to some 400,000 working class residents, the city's mayor, Democrat Bill de Blasio, proposes to demolish two buildings in a Manhattan public housing complex and turn the land over to private developers to build "mixed income" developments. Undoubtedly, if this experiment is 'successful,' more demolitions will follow.

The proposed 'test case' is in the Fulton Houses NYCHA, an 11-building complex in the rapidly gentrifying Chelsea neighborhood on the west side of Manhattan, only a few blocks south of Hudson Yards, a new, mega development of high end residential and commercial real estate. The existing tenants would be moved to supposedly affordable private housing. The three proposed new buildings will reportedly contain nearly 700 apartments, less than a third of which will be rated as affordable.

Illustrating the city's extreme economic inequality, according to the *New York Times*, the average rent in the Fulton Houses is \$660 per month. By contrast, the median market rate rent in Chelsea is \$3,462. The NYCHA residents to be displaced have been given empty assurances by de Blasio and other politicians that they will be protected once relocated to apartments owned by private landlords. The astronomical open market rents in the neighborhood make such statements laughable.

Reports also indicate that the city would transfer management of the remaining Fulton Houses buildings as well as the adjacent Chelsea-Elliott complex to a private

firm.

This latest is but one of several mechanisms being employed to privatize and dismantle NYCHA, once considered the most successful public housing system in the country. Following decades of neglect and budget cuts, living conditions for NYCHA resident have become truly horrific—ranging from toxic lead paint contamination (especially dangerous for young children) to burst plumbing, rampant mold, malfunctioning elevators, and long outages of heat and hot water (often during episodes of severe winter weather), to name but a few. Report after report have documented that even critically necessary repairs often take months or even years to be completed due to the lack of resources, endangering the health and even the lives of residents.

The proposed solutions to funding the tens of billions of dollars needed to make the necessary repairs and upgrades begin with the premise that the wealth of the city's super rich is sacrosanct and cannot be tapped to provide decent housing for those workers on whom this wealth is based. Hence, 'there is no money' for the city and state of New York to undertake the work. Therefore, private developers must be provided with incentives that, in one form or another, represent mechanisms to extract even greater profit at the expense of the working class.

These schemes include turning over management of entire complexes to private firms, who will undertake repairs but then squeeze existing tenants or displace them in order to maximize profits, leasing open space between existing buildings to private developers so that they can build 'market rate' apartment buildings while destroying recreational and parking areas that were integral to the original designs of these complexes, and now, the actual demolition of existing buildings. The city's stated goal is to transfer one third of public housing to private management under the federal Section 8 voucher program.

Allegedly, these mechanisms will provide revenue to NYCHA that will allow it to undertake the necessary repairs and upgrades to the remaining buildings. The estimated cost of repairs to the Fulton Houses alone is \$168 million. In reality, the combined effect will be the massive displacement of existing tenants, greatly exacerbating the already critical lack of affordable housing in the city, while providing new land for high-end development.

Many of the more than 300 NYCHA complexes were originally constructed on what was, at the time, marginal land. With the growth of housing demand by the upper middle class and wealthy elite some of these locations have now become highly attractive. Hence, the growing desire of real estate developers to gain access to these properties, such as the NYCHA complexes in Chelsea. Existing working class residents are simply in the way.

NYCHA residents are fully aware of how they are being sacrificed to the interests of the city's upper class.

Alberta Hale, resident of NYCHA in Chelsea for 15 years described to the World Socialist Web Site the deteriorated conditions she has had to endure. "There are so many problems. The lower levels have rats, or mice. You have to wait two to three years for paint work...I put my own towels down, I painted my apartment myself because if I wait for them to do it, it won't get done."

Referring to the plans to demolish and rebuild two buildings in Chelsea: "It's not going to make anything better, it's to push us out."

"You know how many units are in these apartments? How much rent people pay? They [NYCHA] get plenty money. They need to do something. De Blasio, he promised a lot. He didn't do nothing yet. You're talking about slumlords, that is what they are. That is exactly what they are.

"I used to love Chelsea. It's so close to everything. It's so pretty. But a one-bedroom apartment now costs \$1700 a month. \$1700 for a one bedroom! If it wasn't for the section 8, I don't know how I would pay that. When I first moved here, it was \$900. I want to stay, [but] I'm getting ready to move to North Carolina."

Charles Green, who has lived in NYCHA housing for over 30 years, said about replacement of public housing units, "They are putting something big but possibly very expensive to replace the housing. This is a test case for getting rid of this, similar to how they have privatized public housing in other states. The developers or landlords know that this is prime real estate in Manhattan, and think just by having us here it is lowering the property value in

the area. You can imagine in ten years this will all be condos, but the people who live here now or have lived here for 20 years won't be in this area.

"The city is probably interested in selling it off because it is just a problem for them. Every year there are lawsuits about the conditions here and they probably factored that into getting rid of it. My feeling is that de Blasio is in bed with all these real estate people. What is his real agenda? What does he really want New York to look like?

"All the time now you see an exposure of how bad it is in NYCHA. Well it has been that way for a long time. They just want to talk about it now to try to convince us that the privatizations are good, that we should accept that."

Anthony, who grew up in NYCHA housing, said, "If you are selling buildings or tearing down building you have to make sure the people have some place to go. You can see now that all the shelters are already overcrowded. You have people here that can't afford to live anywhere else, that can't afford Con Edison [utility bills].

"An apartment uptown is \$1,300 a month. We can't afford that, but they just want us out and the upper class people to move in."

Mike, who has lived in public housing for the past 4 years, said about demolition of NYCHA units, "I look at this this way, they are just trying to find someone to scapegoat. They will just blame it on the private owners for kicking us out and making this area for the upper class. They are trying to do to the projects the same things they did to the jails with privatization. After this start it will just expand."

Meanwhile, as the de Blasio administration develops its plans to reward wealthy real estate developers with new properties on which to build residences for the city's upper middle class, a new report by the Coalition for the Homeless highlights the steadily worsening housing conditions for the working class. In February, the reported number of individuals spending the night in the city's homeless shelters reached the all-time high of nearly 64,000, a number that has been on a steady rise since the financial crisis of 2008/9. This does not include the thousands more sleeping in the rough.



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