

Bronx apartment building where recent blaze claimed 17 lives had numerous building code violations and tenant complaints

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New information is coming to light, based on research by The Intercept, indicating a long-standing pattern of neglect regarding maintenance by the owners of the Bronx apartment building known as Twin Parks North West, where fire killed at least 17 people last Sunday.

Public records reveal that twice last year, on April 2 and October 21, the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) issued official notices of violations. These involved the discovery of broken or defective fire-retardant material in the walls, which were found on the first and 12th stories of the building. The issuance of formal notices by HPD indicates that direct inspections had confirmed violations of the city's housing code or state law.

The October violation had subsequently been marked as closed, but that from April remains open. In addition, 17 other violations are also open, including ones for mouse and cockroach infestations, lead-based paint and mold.

A representative of the building's owners, Camber Property Group, Belveron Partners and LIHC Investment Group claimed that all of the violations had been "cured" (i.e., remedied) and that HPD had simply not updated its records regarding the April fire retardant violation. This is despite the HPD records being marked as up to date prior to the fire. A spokesperson for the HPD stated that the agency would review its records and that health and safety are its top priority.

In addition to the violations observed directly by HPD personnel, the department had recorded 65 complaints by members of the public since 2014, 11 of which were received in 2021. An independent database, Who Owns What, indicates that at least 169 violations

were recorded for the building since 2010. Tenants have told the press of persistent heat and fire safety issues that have gone on for years.

The building's owners are big players in New York's affordable housing industry. They hold multiple properties in northern Manhattan and the Bronx. Some of these receive subsidies from the city. The building that burned on Sunday was part of a set of properties in the Bronx purchased by the group in January 2020. The latest acquisition by a consortium consisting of Camber, LIHC along with a nonprofit organization encompassing a nine-building complex in Harlem was concluded a day before the fire. The purchase price of \$85 million included a \$73.1 million loan from the New York City Housing Development Corporation.

The real estate industry has long been an overwhelming force in the political and economic life of the city and is notorious for enjoying lax enforcement of regulations by the city government. In addition, the building where the deadly fire took place is under the jurisdiction of Homes and Community Renewal, a New York State agency. The longstanding poor conditions at the site of the fire, despite years of recorded violations and complaints, are emblematic of governmental subservience to private real estate interests. As with the response to the pandemic, "profits before lives" is the guiding principle under capitalism.

The city Fire Commissioner has stated that a major reason that the fire had such a devastating impact was the failure of the fire door at the entrance to the apartment where the fire started to close automatically, as it should have done. It was not obstructed, but simply failed to function as designed. Following an earlier deadly Bronx fire in 2018, the city passed

legislation that mandated all residential buildings to have self-closing doors by mid-2021. Nevertheless, according to the HPD, the city has “issued more than 22,000 self-closing door violations,” but none at the building in question, despite the fact that news reports indicate that multiple tenants had reported problems with these doors. The colossal number of violations regarding this feature alone illustrates the criminal neglect of the city’s slumlords and the life-threatening conditions produced by this neglect.

Late last year, the New York City Public Advocate released its latest “worst landlords” list, an annual compilation of unresolved housing code violations. The top offender on the list managed 330 apartments in 17 buildings, which received an average of 1,442 violations per building. Of these, 418 were classified as “immediately hazardous.” The second highest had 1,302 violations across a dozen buildings, and the third had 1,192 violations.

In addition to the abysmal conditions in privately held though often publicly subsidized properties, the survey awarded a dishonorable mention to the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). This public agency owns 176,000 apartments which, although not subject to housing code enforcement, are notorious for dangerous and decaying conditions. In November 2021, there were 600,480 open work orders for repairs in NYCHA buildings, up by more than 121,600 from a year earlier.

Thus, it is clear that whether the landlord is private or public, there is a critical lack of decent, affordable housing for the working class.

The abysmal housing conditions suffered by millions of working class residents which are being compounded by the intensifying pandemic are about to get even worse. On January 15, New York State’s eviction moratorium will expire. It is projected that more than 200,000 families will be facing eviction, placing even more pressure on the already grossly inadequate and overpriced stock of affordable housing. The bulk of the 40,000 eviction filings in the city since March 2020 were located in the Bronx.

Even before the pandemic, housing costs in the Bronx, the city’s poorest borough, placed extreme economic stress on residents. A 2018 report by NYU’s Furman Center found that an average of 39 percent of renter households in three zip codes in the Bronx were

classified as rent burdened, meaning that 50 percent or more of their take-home pay went to rent.

The inevitable result of this combination of factors will be to pack large numbers of people, many of whom are highly exploited immigrants, into overcrowded living spaces, or onto the street, creating ideal conditions for the accelerating spread of COVID-19 and death.

The city’s new mayor, Eric Adams, and the state’s governor, Kathy Hochul, both Democrats, have promised that the residents of Twin Parks North West who cannot return to their apartments will be rehoused. Most residents currently have project-based Section 8 federal housing vouchers, which normally ties their voucher to the specific building. However, state officials promised that those who could not return would be eligible for other Section 8 housing.

That remains to be seen. Hochul’s refusal to extend the eviction moratorium clearly indicates her subservience to the real estate lobby. It is also significant that Adams’ transition team includes Rick Gropper, a Camber co-founder. Tenants displaced by an earlier Bronx fire, in March 2020, remained without stable housing for 18 months.

The deterioration and lack of available affordable housing in New York City, as in the country as a whole, has been developing for decades due to cuts in public funding and privatization. These precarious and dangerous housing conditions for the working class exist not only in the US, but around the world, as exemplified by the notorious 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London, which killed 72 people. The resulting inquiry has constituted a colossal cover-up of governmental responsibility.



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