

New York City public housing without lights, heat or water after storm

By a WSWWS reporting team
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On Sunday, as the storm approached, New York's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg threatened to shut off power and electricity to public housing developments in lower Manhattan and northern Brooklyn in an effort to force residents to evacuate.

But residents in some housing developments that lost power and were inundated with water were not told to evacuate by the city, or even warned that they were in a flood-prone area.

At other developments where New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) staff were sent to door-to-door to urge people to evacuate, many residents refused, fearing unsafe conditions in city shelters or looting in their absence.

Some were unable to comply even if they had wanted to because of age or infirmity. NYCHA offered no services to provide for special needs.

Had the mayor made good on his threat, many who remained in their apartments after 7:00 PM on Sunday would have been trapped before the storm even hit the city.

Residents did not have long to wait. On Monday night during the storm, a Consolidated Edison power station exploded, cutting electricity to all of lower Manhattan.

The city authorities have barely mentioned the plight of NYCHA residents and the city media have observed a near total blackout on the worsening threats to their health and safety.

NYCHA's own media have done as little as possible to inform residents or the public of the situation. Posts on its website, Facebook page and Twitter feed curtly noted that the authority is, "only addressing critical repairs at this time." No federal or state agency has addressed the needs of the communities in the housing developments.

Much of this housing, home to thousands of working-class families, is badly in need of repair and overrun with vermin. Several of the NYCHA developments in lower Manhattan are less than two miles away from the New York Stock Exchange, which was restored to full power by Wednesday morning. The Goldman Sachs building, also close to some of the affected public housing, was heavily sandbagged before the storm, and never lost power because the investment bank had fitted its headquarters with its own internal generators.

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited the Baruch houses, home to over 5,000 people on Houston Street, to discuss their experiences with the storm and its aftermath. Many were skeptical that even if they had complied with the evacuation order, there would be enough room to hold all of the residents there. During the storm, water rose four feet above the ground, engulfing cars.

The water supply at the buildings has been cut off because pumps have failed due to the lack of electricity. Residents told us that there was no heat in the buildings with temperatures expected to drop into the 40s Fahrenheit at night. No one knew when electricity would be back on.

Residents were filling buckets and containers with water from an opened fireplug in the street and carrying them up in some cases over a dozen flights of stairs. A handful of people tinkered with their cars trying to get them running again.

"Unlike people in other parts of the city, we have no back up generators," Miriam Capo a Baruch resident told us, "Bloomberg and his friends are nice and safe while we, the working class, have to suffer. It was really insulting when he said we made a mistake by not evacuating. That's easy for him to say. Where are our

generators?

“Now we have nothing, no heat, no electricity, no water. Elderly people have had to walk up several flights of stairs with buckets. Where is the help? The city is doing nothing.

“We have no emergency lights in the building. I have been lighting candles trying to help myself and others get up and down the stairs. It's ridiculous. And no one wants to report on this. I don't see any news people down here.”

Eddie said, “Everything's a mess right now. Water is coming down walls. No one came to help us after Monday, no one from the Red Cross, no one from FEMA, no one. It's like we don't exist.

“The infrastructure was not in place for something like this. The building I live in badly needs maintenance. There are dead rats and a smell of dead rats everywhere. The city won't do any bricklaying work on the building. There's no plumbing or plastering done. All they do is fix two or three potholes and that's about it. Now we won't have electricity for days.

“And we are paying a really high rent here; it's gone up 30 percent in the last few years. Our vote doesn't mean anything. They don't care about the working class. The city keeps telling us there's no money for maintenance in these buildings. But why are the rich getting richer and richer?”

Keturah Segui, an unemployed teacher's aide, said that there was no way that she could have evacuated her apartment, with her mother-in-law having recently undergone brain surgery.

“Now we don't have electricity, elevators or water except by climbing down the stairs and filling containers, which we then carry back up—this building has 13 floors.

“There is no light in the hallways or stairs, and there has been at least one assault. The only reason we are standing out here is because we feel so isolated inside—there is no TV or radio, and no way to charge our phones.

“We are glad to see you because no one has been here to talk to us. We just get information from people who have heard bits and pieces from others.”

Shontel Srooks, a transit dispatcher, had worked a 24-hour shift the previous night attempting to run test trains through the subway system. Wednesday she

stayed home to care for her son.

“Different classes get taken care of differently,” she said. She recalled that during the last blackout her train had stopped on the more affluent Upper West Side. “After we got everyone evacuated we saw the Red Cross out there taking care of people. Needless to say, when I got back down here after my shift it was different story.”

There were similar scenes at the Elliot public housing complex across town in Chelsea. Sam Velez, a young worker, told the WSWS: “I spoke to management from the housing authority today. They said it would take anywhere from seven to 14 days. People can't use the bathroom. They can't cook. They can't bathe. They are basically telling us to hunker down and eat it. There are senior citizens, young kids, and disabled people here. The building goes up to 21 floors. There are no elevators working. People are stranded in their apartments. Seven to 14 days makes no sense. Bloomberg says he is doing what he can, but this is thousands of people living here. They can get Wall Street back up and running. Battery Park [a more affluent downtown area] has lights and power, and they were worse off than us. Why can't they do anything here?

“They can take care of the rich, the stockbrokers uptown and the people who have money. Even if they have more flooding, they have been fixed. But for public housing there is nothing.”

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