

New York City throws Hurricane Sandy victims out on the street

By Philip Guelpa
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Nearly a year after Hurricane Sandy devastated sections of the northeastern US coastline on October 29, 2012, the promises made by federal and local officials that victims would not be abandoned are ringing hollow for many. The storm damaged or destroyed the homes of hundreds of thousands, particularly in coastal New York and New Jersey.

Large numbers of working class families and individuals have not been able to find decent, permanent places to live due to the high cost of housing and the slow pace of reconstruction. Many home and small business owners are still awaiting insurance settlements or promised government assistance. This is in sharp contrast to the rapid and massive aid provided to large corporations and wealthy neighborhoods in places such as lower Manhattan, where services began to be restored within days of the storm.

The sharpest example of the callousness with which many of those impacted by Sandy have been treated is the City of New York's current move to evict hundreds of people from hotels in which they have been living since losing their homes due to the storm. Originally, approximately 3,000 people were covered by a program under which the city, aided by federal subsidies, paid for their hotel rooms. About 350 now remain.

City representatives contend that it is perfectly acceptable to force those still in hotels into homeless shelters, which are squalid and overcrowded. The city complains that there is no more money to assist these people because of the federal government's cut-off of subsidies to the city for this program on September 30. City officials say they have money to continue payments only until the end of this week. New York had already attempted to cut off assistance to Sandy victims for hotels back in May, but was blocked by a

court order. Court appeals to continue the program have been rejected this time.

Many people displaced by the storm, principally those with lower incomes, have had difficulty finding new housing due to limited availability and high rents in the New York area. The latter are usually over a thousand dollars a month, even for the most minimal accommodations in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Federal assistance to Sandy victims for apartment rentals has been slow in coming and is, in many cases, inadequate. Hotel subsidy programs run directly by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have already been terminated.

To add to the brutality of the city's move, the displaced residents aren't being given spaces in the homeless shelters, but merely told that they can submit applications, with no guarantee of acceptance. Shelters have long waiting lists. As a result, many of these Sandy victims are likely to be thrown onto the street. The traumatic impact is expressed by one person about to be evicted who was quoted in the press. "I'm not going to no more shelters—I've been there and done that," she said, weeping. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't want to think about it."

The inability of working class families to find decent, affordable housing in New York illustrates the city's stark economic inequality (see "Crisis of affordable housing hits broad sections of working class in New York"). There has been a dramatic rise in homelessness in New York City over the past decade, especially marked since the 2008 financial crisis. In 2010, for example, over 113,000 people, including nearly 43,000 children, spent time in city shelters (see "New York City homelessness continues to set new records").

Even people with jobs have difficulty finding housing. The *New York Times* recently reported that a

significant proportion of the 50,000 people currently staying in the city's homeless shelters (a record high) are employed, but are unable to find a place to live which they can afford.

The contrast between the living conditions of the wealthy and the rest of the population is striking. At a time when luxury residences are being built at an accelerating pace and sold for astronomical sums, public housing is rapidly deteriorating due to budget cuts. Proposals have been advanced to take space from public housing complexes in order to build luxury apartment buildings (see "New York to use public housing and school property for luxury high-rises"). Many public housing complexes in the city were damaged by Sandy, leaving residents without heat and electricity for days. Even before the hurricane, wait times for repairs often stretched to months and even years.

The aftermath of Hurricane Sandy only served to exacerbate the dramatic and growing divide between rich and poor in the world's financial capital.

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