

New Census Bureau report details poor conditions in New York's Public Housing

By Mark Witkowski
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Every three years, the US Census Bureau conducts a New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey, which analyzes key statistics and conditions of New York City's housing stock. The latest report was released last month.

One of the more significant findings of the report is that while overall housing conditions have improved in the city, physical conditions in public housing for roughly 500,000 residents have continuously remained poor and, by some measurements, have gotten worse.

Most notable among the physical deficiencies tracked is the rise in the number of heating system breakdowns which were experienced by 28 percent of residents who live in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) properties, compared to 24 percent in the previous survey.

During the height of one winter storm early this year, the central heating systems failed at several large complexes leaving thousands to cope the best they could in single-digit temperatures. The number of water leaks reported also increased since the previous report.

A public advocacy group, the Citizens Budget Commission (CBC), which attempts to influence the allocation of city resources, published a summary of the Census Bureau's survey which shows that the NYCHA has been unable to affect the repairs needed to adequately meet the needs of residents.

"The growing gap in building quality between NYCHA and other rental housing units should deepen the urgency of efforts to improve conditions," wrote the commission's Senior Research Associate, Sean Campion. He concluded that if unchecked, worsening conditions will reach the point where it is no longer cost-effective to make repairs.

Since 2001, the federal government has slashed \$2.7

billion from NYCHA funding. The city's response to this has been to delay or cancel maintenance and capital improvement projects, causing the repair load to rapidly build.

In June there was a settlement between NYCHA and the US Attorney General's office in which NYCHA accepted responsibility for filing false test results on lead paint in the dwellings as well as failing to provide adequate heat and abate mold infestations. The City has proposed to pay \$2.2 billion for capital improvements and appoint a monitor to oversee NYCHA. Earlier this year New York Governor Andrew Cuomo declared a state of emergency in the housing projects without providing the needed funding to carry out the repairs.

The CBC report quotes a figure of \$32 billion dollars from NYCHA officials on the cost to bring the housing projects up to good standards. This figure reflects years of neglect and underfunding as government has cut spending on public housing. How, or even if, these repairs will be funded is unclear against the backdrop of the usual claims by politicians that there is no money.

To put this figure in perspective, the US Navy recently spent \$13 billion on an aircraft carrier with two more such ships planned in its Ford class program. Funding for these military projects was never in question.

The CBC report also tracked conditions in the city's private housing sector. One of the significant findings is that the physical conditions in public housing are the worst of the city's housing stock.

A speculative building boom in the city continues to produce numerous new and generally unaffordable luxury rentals and condos. As more and more new high-end apartments become available to the limited number of high-income people who can afford them,

developers have been adding amenities to the apartments and buildings to attract renters and buyers.

For example, new residential towers offer tenants an array of amenities. One complex advertises a “fitness center, a yoga and spin studio, a catering kitchen, library, co-work spaces, resident’s lounge, 24-hour concierge, valet parking, and a year-round greenhouse, bocce courts” and the list goes on.

Refrigerated lockers are provided in the lobby area so doormen can accept deliveries of groceries from Amazon Fresh. The amenities in the new developments are closed to the public and only benefit those who can afford to live there.

WSWS reporters spoke to residents at the Nathan Strauss Housing project on East 28th street in Manhattan about the housing crisis.

Ali, a nine-year resident of the projects told us: “The apartments are all messed up. The paint is coming down. There are mice and roaches in the apartment. We complain often, but they send people who do nothing.”

Referring to new luxury apartments in the area that are, for the most part, out of reach of the working class, Ali said, “You don’t have to look far to see the contrasts in this city. The building across the street is very expensive and the rents are very high.”

Contrasting this to the projects where he lives, Ali said, “Management is very nasty to the tenants. They don’t listen to what we have to say. We write letters and it does no good. The managers don’t want to talk to you. When you go to their office, you can only speak to a clerk. NYCHA management is like the mafia. They harass you and verbally threaten you.”

The housing management harassment that Ali referred to is a common one. Repairs can take weeks and even months to be made. Simply getting the bureaucracy in NYCHA to acknowledge a problem can itself be a major task.

Referring again to expensive units in the area immediately around the Strauss houses, another resident, J. Rodriguez, told the WSWS, “This is the Million Dollar Mile around here where NYU owns the hospitals, and the hospitals own the buildings across the street and up and down First Avenue. I worked at NYU, but it doesn’t pay enough to live on, even though your children can go to NYU for free if you do work there.”

New York University is among the top ten real estate

concerns in the lucrative New York City real estate market. It has been a driving force in the gentrification of large swaths of Manhattan where working class families have been driven out.

At time when more and more housing units are being built in the city, a major contradiction is unfolding—the homeless population of the city is growing alongside the speculative boom. Most of the new units are being bought up by wealthy and institutional investors. Enormous profits are being made.

At the same time housing conditions for hundreds of thousands of the city’s poorest residents continue to decline. A report issued by the City’s Comptroller’s office this month noted:

“Between 2005 and 2017, rising rents led to the disappearance of 1.069 million apartments renting for \$900 or less (in 2017 dollars) from the City’s housing inventory. The largest share of these units – 40 percent, or 428,000 apartments – saw their rents increase to between \$1,051 and \$1,500. Apartments renting for over \$2,700 per month increased by approximately 238,000 units.”

Yet the Democrats who, for the most part, control the city and state, including the supposedly progressive major, Bill De Blasio, repeat the refrain that the resources to eliminate homelessness and house working people affordably are not available.

Under a capitalist system in an advanced state of decay, they are correct. The solution to the housing crisis that no section of the Democratic Party can propose lies in the reorganization of society by the working class along socialist lines, confiscating the huge fortunes made on Wall Street, and allocating them to meet the basic requirements of the mass of the population. Housing is a basic human need and must be treated as such; it is not something which can be left up to the profit system to provide.

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