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## Tenants File Suit Against Notorious Landlord Over 'Harassment' Tactics

By Allegra Hobbs ([WWW.DNAINFO.COM/NEW-YORK/ABOUT-US/OUR-TEAM/EDITORIAL-TEAM/ALLEGRA-HOBBS](http://WWW.DNAINFO.COM/NEW-YORK/ABOUT-US/OUR-TEAM/EDITORIAL-TEAM/ALLEGRA-HOBBS)) | December 15, 2016 10:00pm

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Francis Di Donato, third from the right, is one of nine residents of 159 Stanton St. accusing landlord Steve Croman of harassment tactics and unsafe conditions.

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**LOWER EAST SIDE** — Rent-stabilized tenants who say they have suffered aggressive harassment tactics and unsafe conditions stemming from construction since controversial landlord Steve Croman bought their building in 2013 have brought a lawsuit against him demanding safe and habitable homes.

Nine tenants of 159 Stanton St. have accused the reviled landlord, who is already being sued by Attorney General Eric Schneiderman (<https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20160509/east-harlem/tenants-celebrate-indictment-of-controversial-landlord-steve-croman>) for alleged harassment tactics, of trying to drive them out of their homes with unsafe construction practices after aggressive buy-out offers didn't succeed, according to the suit filed Monday in a city housing court.

"I don't want to be pushed out of this building, and people warned me when Croman bought the building that was going to happen," said Francis Di Donato, who has lived in the building for 25 years, at a rally Thursday, the day after the suit was filed. "I have to say, in my experience, it completely transpired that way."

Di Donato says his nightmare began when Croman took him to court on phony charges of nonpayment of rent, then escalated when menacing strangers started showing up at his door demanding to come in and look around. He also says he was offered "pathetic amounts of money" to leave his apartment.

According to the lawsuit, tenants of the building were repeatedly visited by "tenant relocation specialist" Anthony Falconite, who allegedly harassed tenants with aggressive bribes to abandon their homes while "banging on Petitioners' doors, yelling and using abusive language."

Falconite was also mentioned in the attorney general's lawsuit, which noted that Croman had called him his "secret weapon."

The landlord in August 2015 then kicked off demolition and construction work throughout the building, wreaking havoc on the tenants' homes and quality of life while routinely failing to make timely repairs, the suit alleges, noting tenants had suffered collapsed ceilings, damage from persistent leaking, and dust and debris.

Some of the construction had been carried out illegally, without permits, the suit alleges. Department of Building records show one active violation against the property for doing electrical work without a permit.

On top of the hazardous conditions, the construction work has often left the building unprotected and open to intruders, according to the suit, which describes doors and windows left ajar and vacant units left unlocked, resulting in an uptick in crime within the building.

Di Donato described an incident in which someone came into his apartment through a collapsed ceiling, stole money from his apartment, and left a cloud of debris when fleeing — unfortunately, it wasn't the only time his belongings were snatched.

"Someone broke into my apartment again and stole my guitar, which I'd had since the '90s. That was my prized possession," he said.

Leaks in the ceiling are so bad, says the lawsuit, water flows down the stairwell and hallway when it rains.

And when pushed to fix such conditions as collapsed ceilings and cracked walls, building management is slow to respond.

The unlivable conditions all amount to "a deliberate campaign of harassment in order to make the building so inhospitable and unsafe that tenants will vacate their rent-stabilized apartments," the suit alleges.

Di Donato said he has certainly felt that way since Croman took over, describing the trials of raising his preteen son in an environment reminiscent of a "squat."

"It used to be a vibrant, lovely Lower East Side apartment, where all the apartments were full," he said. "It was a community. Now it's half empty..."

"My feeling is, I am pretty much being pushed out by having the conditions be so poor that I just can't bear to live here anymore."

A Croman rep disputed the lawsuit's allegations that management company 9300 Realty had been unresponsive to tenants' complaints of construction and hazardous conditions, claiming that management had acted quickly to carry out repairs and address concerns.

"9300 has been very responsive to the Cooper Square Committee and the tenants at 159 Stanton Street. The communication is well documented and our good faith efforts are very transparent," said a statement from 9300 Realty spokeswoman Jane Hardey.

"We have reached out to the tenants of 159 Stanton and the Cooper Square Committee on multiple occasions offering to immediately address any open issues at the building and in tenants' apartments. Management has not been informed of any open repair items in tenant apartments, however we remain willing to immediately address any such issues as they are brought to our attention. Additionally, past repair issues have been addressed promptly."

Emails exchanged between a tenant advocate and management rep during December 2015 show the two parties had corresponded during that month, and that building management disputed tenants' claims of lagging repair work — noting several instances in which HPD violations were not immediately remedied were due to lack of access — while expressing a desire to address resident's concerns.

In addition to the Attorney General's lawsuit alleging harassment, Croman in May was indicted on a host of felony charges involving lying about his rental income to scam banks out of millions of dollars. He could face up to 25 years in prison for the charges.

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