

LANDLORD STEVE CROMAN TARGETED BY HIS OWN TENANTS WITH THESE FLYERS

BY NICK LUCCHESI

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A weathered flyer at 51st and Ninth in Hell's Kitchen warns tenants to "beware" of Steve Croman.

Photo by Nick Lucchesi of ti

"BEWARE," warn the posters going up in several Manhattan neighborhoods about mega-landlord Steve Croman and his company, 9300 Realty.

"They should really be on the lookout," explains a tenant and spokesman for the [Stop Croman Coalition](#) who called the *Voice* after we emailed the group asking about the posters. Like the other current tenants who called, he asked to remain anonymous, fearing reprisal from his landlord. "[The posters] are to just to get the word out to prospective

tenants, and also to reach out to current tenants to let them know that there's assistance from the coalition if they need it."

News [reports](#) put the number of buildings managed by Croman's 9300 Realty at 100, though real estate listings site [NY Bits](#) returns 145 addresses – because of the various LLCs that are on deed, it's a figure that's tough to pin down. Estimates by his tenants, some of whom have entire dossiers on the landlord, put the number even higher, around 185.

Members of the Stop Croman Coalition say his m.o. is to cycle tenants in and out quickly, in order to raise rent via the "vacancy deregulation" rule that gives landlords the opportunity to raise rent by 20 percent between leases. Another rule allows landlords to permanently raise the rent if capital improvements are made, meaning you'll be paying for that refrigerator forever.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Croman tells the *Voice* the group represents the minority:

"These flyers have been posted by a small group of individuals who are using these smear tactics to further their own personal agenda," writes a Croman spokesperson, via [Marathon Strategies](#), a public relations firm run by Phil Singer, a former senior adviser to U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer.

"We have tried numerous times to reach out to them in order to work constructively on their concerns, but they have resisted our attempts to work cooperatively with them," the statement continues. "They have resorted to these measures as a direct result of their failed attempts to extract unjustified financial compensation from the landlord. The fact remains that we take great pride in our properties and the negative opinions being expressed by these individuals are not being made in good faith."

Meanwhile, current rent regulation laws – set to expire on June 15 – also allow for an apartment to become market-rate when rent hits \$2,500 a month, *if* the total household income is more than \$200,000 a year. (We can't share this enough: Here's the most recent [Tenants' Rights Guide](#).) According to an [Associated Press story](#) published Sunday, 266,000 New York apartments have been deregulated since 1994.

As for the Croman tenants who won't move out? They say they're faced with an unending din of clanging, banging, and sawing, plus piles and piles of the resulting dust, as workers renovate apartments all around them, making the situation so bad they might want to find a new place to live.

"If you live on the top floor and you're wearing a suit and tie, by the time you're downstairs you're covered in dust," says one tenant.

Another tactic, several tenants tell the *Voice*, is to wrap them up in lawsuits over alleged lease violations – allegations of painting walls without permission or denying access to make repairs, even if the tenant wasn't home when the handyman came knocking.

Cynthia Chaffee, who's lived in her now Croman-owned apartment at East 18th Street since 1970, has been battling the landlord for more than fifteen years – at one point she says he called her "his worst tenant ever" during one of the nine court cases between the two. She says she resisted a \$150,000 buyout via his lawyers in the early 2000s, and in 2007, she and Mary Ann Miller of [WBAI](#) would form the first incarnation of the Stop Croman Coalition.

"The only thing that will make me happy is when he's in jail," Chaffee says. She notes the group keeps its own tally of new Croman buildings by looking for the "for rent" signs [9300 Realty hangs](#) outside its tenements. "He's really buying up buildings in Harlem," she adds.

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It wasn't long before the tenants realized that this was a lie. What Croman really wanted was for all of them to move out. Croman may be only 31 years old, but he has already

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10 worst lan



Up-and-coming downtown Manhattan landlord Steve Croman, 31, is pressuring longtime tenants to leave, then replacing them with residents who can pay much steep

Pictured in the March 24, 1998, issue of the *Voice*, Croman is described as an "up-and-coming downtown landlord."

Photo by A.

In 1998, the 31-year-old Croman made the *Voice*'s list of Ten Worst Landlords in New York (he landed on that list [again in 2014](#)). Back then, Croman took a hands-on approach to harassing tenants: *Voice* writer [J.A. Lobb](#), in the issue from March 24 of that year, told the story of Jelon Vieira, who lived in a Croman building at 252 Mott Street:

According to Vieira, his landlord has called him more than 30 times over the last few months to pester him about moving. Croman has even showed up at the choreographer's office to try to persuade him in person. Vieira is often away on tour and sometimes has friends house-sit. Now Croman is using this against him, trying to evict Vieira by claiming he sublet the apartment.

Croman's smarmy, duplicitous style can be even more unnerving than his persistence. "He calls you like you're his best friend," says Vieira. "[He asks,] 'How are you? How's your health?'" When the *New York Times* gave DanceBrazil a glowing review last fall, Croman phoned Vieira to offer his congratulations – and to exhort him to move out. About Croman's behavior, Vieira says, "It's disturbed me to the point where I can't really concentrate on my work."

Vieira grows exasperated when asked what he thinks about the effect of his landlord's behavior. "This is about kicking the poor people out of Manhattan – the blacks the

behavior. This is about kicking the poor people out of Manhattan – the blacks, the Hispanics," Vieira claims. "Croman talks to you – if you have an accent or are black or Hispanic – as if you're stupid. One day he came to me and said, you have to move out because I'm saying so; the judge has ordered it." (Vieira says Croman's court action against him is still unresolved.)

To hear his current tenants tell it, Croman's tactics have grown more aggressive since the Nineties, but he doesn't handle much of the dirty work firsthand any longer. Last summer, the activities of a Croman employee (or in tenants' words, "a criminal henchman"), Anthony Falconite, were enough to warrant an investigation by New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman. As laid out in the [Daily News](#): "Falconite has forced his way into apartments, snapped photos of tenants' mail and belongings, and repeatedly threatened them with eviction."

Nelida Godfrey, who rents an apartment and a commercial space for her Peruvian restaurant – Lima's Taste – from Croman, says he's been trying for four years in court to evict her.

"He probably cares more about [the money] more than I care," she tells the *Voice*. "For him it's a lot, for me it's what is right."

His aggrieved tenants' passion is such that they've extended their investigative efforts to Croman's political interests: They point to campaign contributions made by Croman and his wife, Harriet – "limousine liberals," as two described them – as suspicious, although at the federal level they've donated to only one politician, according to Federal Election Commission records:

Croman [donated \\$3,800](#) to Schumer's [Friends of Schumer](#) campaign committee in May 2009, with Harriet Croman [donating \\$7,200](#) on the same day, totaling \$11,000.

In February, Governor Andrew Cuomo, along with Schneiderman and Mayor Bill de Blasio, [announced](#) they would form a "Tenant Harassment Prevention Task Force" that would address the sorts of things Croman's tenants say they still experience. In October, the *Voice* explored just [how the city's worst landlords abuse their tenants](#) to the point where they want to get the hell out, no matter how attractive the rent.

"If you're rent-stabilized, why would you give up the apartment?" says a Croman tenant of about five years. "That's your golden egg in the city, and you'll put up with a lot to keep it."



Some tenants have no love for 9300 Realty.

With state laws set to expire in less than a week, advocates for stronger regulation are whipping up a populist campaign for the 2 million people who live in the 1 million apartments that are either rent-controlled or rent-stabilized. There have been rallies, protests, arrests, and the expected online petition.

New York City's first lady, Chirlane McCray, joined the effort with the "[Support Affordable Housing in New York City](#)" petition, announced via email on June 4 – 24 hours later, it had received 3,000 signatures. By Monday, the number of signatures was above 6,000, says a rep with the mayor's office.

Also last week, City Councilmember [Corey Johnson](#) was among a group of 55 people, including 12 elected officials, who were [arrested](#) in Albany for disorderly conduct during a rally for rent regulation at the state capitol.

At a rent regulation rally last week in Harlem, de Blasio brought out the "tale of two cities" comparison used during his mayoral campaign, and said that more than half of New Yorkers are burdened by rent: "Over 56 percent of New Yorkers are struggling to pay the rent," he told a lively audience. (That's [a figure that's been called a "myth"](#) by the Citizens Budget Commission, a government spending watchdog.)

While the state assembly expectedly [passed the stronger rent laws on May 19](#), the final two hurdles for its supporters are the Republican-controlled state senate and Cuomo.

"The governor and the senate now have to act," de Blasio told the crowd. "It's on them now. And it's simple. If they act, they protect housing for over 2 million people. They protect affordability. They protect our economy. They protect our future. They keep this city the greatest city in the world."

As for Croman's angry tenants who've spent years battling him, they say they'd be happy to see him go: "I have no problem filling my time," Chaffee says. "I'm a painter. I'm an artist. I can do some pretty good paintings. I will do that."

But for now, the next Stop Croman Coalition meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. on June 18 at the offices of housing group the [Good Old Lower East Side](#), 169 Avenue B.

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