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Pols name and shame 'predatory' landlords

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Council Members Dan Garodnick and Jumaane Williams with tenants at a press conference at City Hall (Photo by Maria Rocha-Buschel)

By Maria Rocha-Buschel

Tenant advocate groups have a message for landlord who harass tenants: You're being watched.

At a press conference last Thursday, the advocates and elected officials said that they have identified predatory equity landlords who tenants say have been mistreating them and forcing them to live in hazardous conditions. Councilmembers Dan Garodnick and Jumaane Williams, who formed the Coalition Against Predatory Equity last year with Councilmember Ritchie Torres from the Bronx, were at the event.

"We now have names attached to these situations so they know we're going after them," Williams, chair of the Council's Housing Committee, said.

The landlords that have been singled out are Alma Realty Corp., Benedict Realty Group, Coltown Properties, Icon, SMRC Management, Steve Croman and Ved Parkash. Various tenants from buildings owned by these landlords were at the event, including residents of 444 East 13th Street, who recently filed a lawsuit against their new management company with the help of the Urban Justice Center because they have no gas or hot water and the management company has been doing construction despite a stop work order from the Department of Buildings.

Stabilizing NYC, the tenant coalition that organized the rally, singled out the landlords by considering five factors, which are a high debt-to-income ratio, high levels of turnover in both rent stabilized and non-rent stabilized stock, a significant percentage of tenants complaining of harassment, when affordable housing becomes unaffordable and poor physical conditions in the building caused by deferred building maintenance.

A resident of 128 Second Avenue who spoke at the event said that he is fighting with his building's owner, Icon, who is refusing to renew his rent stabilized lease and has accused him of running an illegal hotel out of his apartment. He noted that the building has been without gas, heat and hot water since March.

Keriann Pauls, a staff attorney with the Urban Justice Center, said that the UJC has filed a lawsuit on behalf of the tenants in that building and the owners are moving towards contempt because Icon has not restored essential services, despite an order from the judge.

The Daily News also reported in April that Stage Restaurant, located at the same address on Second Avenue, is suing the landlord because of an eviction attempt. The restaurant owners were trying to repair gas lines following the explosion on Second Avenue, which took place down the block.

When trying to make the repairs, they found that Con Ed had turned off the gas and the DOB put a stop work order on the repairs, telling them that only the landlord could pay the fines. The building owner is reportedly convinced that the restaurant has been siphoning gas illegally and not only refused to pay the fine but also went to court and got an eviction notice, on the grounds that the restaurant had violated the terms of their lease.

In addition to a lack of basic services and unlivable conditions caused by construction work, tenants say that they have been harassed in other ways, such as through illegal fees and frivolous lawsuits. Tenant groups say that the basis for all such harassment is to drive residents out of their rent stabilized apartments, an effort mainly caused by predatory equity landlords who bought these rent stabilized buildings at inflated prices before the 2008 market crash under the assumption that they would be able to push longtime tenants out, increase the rents and make a substantial profit.

"There are so many tools that landlords can use against tenants," Garodnick said. "It's not a problem that is unique to Manhattan. This is happening throughout the city. We're watching as this problem is repeating over and over again while they try to get you out while they drive down their costs. These tactics are wrong and need to be stopped."

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