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The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

# Tenants vs. Landlords From Hell

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD MAY 17, 2016

A chorus of hallelujahs arose across New York City last week. It came from the thousands of people unlucky enough to live in a building owned by Steven Croman.

Mr. Croman, who owns more than 140 apartment buildings across Manhattan, was arrested May 9 after a nearly two-year investigation by State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, who hit him with a one-two punch. The first, the criminal case, involves multiple felony charges of fraud and larceny in Mr. Croman's real estate business. The second is a civil lawsuit accusing Mr. Croman of illegally scheming to trick, frighten and bully people out of their rent-regulated apartments, so he could charge new tenants more.

In a city in the grips of an affordable-housing crisis, where tenants and landlords wage epic battles over scarce and precious apartments, Mr. Croman's notoriety long preceded his arrest. He has been a mainstay of "worst landlords" lists for years, and his tenants have found solidarity reviling him on the web.

According to Mr. Schneiderman, the hatred is well founded. As the civil suit describes it, Mr. Croman was willing to use "any means necessary" to force tenants into taking buyouts, including threats and frivolous lawsuits, refusal to fix hazardous code violations, disruptive repairs and an overall willingness to

let his buildings rot until he got what he wanted.

A former New York police officer, Anthony Falconite, is also named in the suit, accused of being Mr. Croman's muscle, entering apartments while posing as a repairman or building manager and harassing tenants with baseless threats of eviction. The complaint makes the landlord sound like a David Mamet office thug: "Croman walks through the office chanting, 'buyouts, buyouts!' and reprimands employees for not obtaining enough buyouts."

The housing shortage is bad enough without people doing what Steven Croman apparently got away with for decades. According to a new report on the state of New York housing by the Furman Center at New York University, issued last week, the pressure of rising rents is being felt across the city, not just in gentrifying neighborhoods, suggesting the need for broader efforts to preserve the affordable housing supply.

At a panel discussion of the report's findings on gentrification, City Council member Brad Lander noted that Mayor Bill de Blasio's campaign to create new housing by requiring developers to set aside a portion of units in new buildings for lower-rent apartments, while important, was not the entire solution for stabilizing neighborhoods. The lucky will get to move into those units, but lots of other people will need help just staying where they are.

This is why the Croman case has to be the beginning, not the end, of a bigger campaign to protect tenants' rights — a concerted effort to use all the power that the state and city can muster to keep the teeth in rent regulation, to give an edge to tenants in the perpetual war with landlords who have big property portfolios but no scruples. Mr. Schneiderman is doing his part, with the help of the city's health and buildings departments and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development. The City Council has taken steps of its own, passing legislation to make sure tenants know their rights and toughening the penalties for tenant harassment. Renters need to know they can turn down buyouts if they wish; landlords need to know they will be

punished for breaking the law.

Council member Jumaane Williams of Brooklyn, chairman of the Committee on Housing and Buildings, called the Croman charges “a bittersweet victory” because the alleged abuses in this case, while spectacularly appalling, are common across the city. If state and city officials can find a way to spread the joy that greeted Mr. Croman’s apparent downfall to beleaguered tenants of other landlords across New York, then we’ll be getting somewhere.

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