



Tenant leader Alease McKelvey speaks at a Harlem Tenants United Coalition Press Conference with Senator Charles Schumer, Representative Charles Rangel, and Assemblyman Keith L.T. Wright.

NEW YORK

Low-income tenants in Harlem fight for their homes in a community rapidly gentrifying

By Kate Johnston, Tenant Organizer, New York State Tenants & Neighbors

On March 2nd, a crowd of tenants held signs reading “Keep Harlem affordable!” and “Tenants built Harlem, not landlords,” at a press conference outside Mother Zion McMurray Apartments in West Harlem.

The members of the Harlem Tenants United Coalition had come to make a statement about the urgent need to preserve subsidized and affordable housing in Harlem, where 4,500 units of government-subsidized housing have been converted to market rate rentals in the past three years, and hundreds more could disappear in the next nine months.

Harlem as an epicentre of culture
Harlem is known across the world as an American epicentre of culture. The unique fusion here of an African American community and of succeeding waves of immigrant communities—Russian, Italian, Mexican, Dominican—is irreplaceable. However, a demographic shift is bringing higher-income tenants to the area. Without adequate regulation to ensure current tenants’ rights are respected, the market is pushing

low- and moderate-income tenants out of their homes, leaving them with few options as rents across the city continue to rise. The historic character of Harlem and the well-being of its tenants are at risk.

More condos means less affordable rentals

Several development schemes aim to fuel Harlem’s gentrification and profit from it, including Columbia University’s plan to extend its campus five city blocks north into West Harlem. A real estate investment trust proposed a 21-story tower intended to house Major League Baseball offices. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has plans to rezone 125th Street, Harlem’s major thoroughfare, to make way for more offices and up to 1,800 condominiums. Attracting higher-income residents to the area in the absence of adequate rent regulation will inevitably result in displacement of low- and moderate-income tenants as rents increase.

Section 8 tenants at immediate risk

Some of the earliest victims of Harlem’s rapid gentrification are low-income tenants living in privately-owned buildings that are

kept affordable by rental subsidies through the US government’s project-based Section 8 program. Right now, hundreds of families are at risk in these developments – their landlords are taking advantage of rising property values by trying to leave the affordability program and convert the apartments to market-rate housing.

The Tenant Response

Tenant associations from six federally subsidized estates in Harlem and neighbouring Morningside Heights have joined together in the new Harlem Tenants United Coalition to increase their collective strength. Together, they are reaching out to community groups, politicians, and the press to pressure their landlords either to renew their Section 8 contracts with the federal government or to sell the buildings to non-profit developers. The March 2nd press conference was a promising first step. The elected officials urged landlords to come to the table with them to work out a deal to preserve the buildings, and expressed commitment to supporting the Coalition’s individual building campaigns.

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