

Courts Work with Landlords in Keeping Rents High for Negro Workers in Harlem

18 Tenants in One House Raised About \$10 Following a Recent Raise

By SOL AUERBACH

(This is the fifth article in the series now running exclusively in the Daily Worker exposing the intolerable housing conditions in Harlem. Previous articles told of a "dumbell" apartment, a Seventh Avenue tenement and of "elevator" apartments on Eighth Avenue. The present article describes further the rent-raising tactics of the landlords.)

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"WE WON'T do anything to this apartment unless you accept a \$10 raise," said the landlord to Mrs. Pearl Williams who lives in a five-story tenement at 72 West 133rd Street.

Mrs. Williams has lived there for 10 years. From the time she first moved in she has been raised at the rate of \$1 a year and now pays \$42 for the five-room apartment which she shares with another family.

The raises were toned down somewhat because Mrs. Williams is a fighter. Every time he wanted to raise her she would take him to court and fight the raise. This court fight is not very effective, as you can see for yourselves.

Court and Landlord.

In the first place it is expensive. Last time she went to court she had to employ a lawyer and pay him \$25. It did not help. The raise came anyhow.

That is the usual occurrence. When a landlord knows the tenant will go to court he will ask for an exorbitant raise and the judge will usually grant him a raise a little lower than what he asks for. In that way the judge makes a pretense of helping the tenant.

When the case comes to court a compromise is struck, if the raise seems too exorbitant, and the landlord gets what he wants. In many cases the judge is a friend of the landlord and will do him a good turn. The tenant, of course, is left in the cold.

There is no getting away from it. The courts serve the landlords just as the state legislature and the petty Harlem politicians—both Negro and white—do.

Birds of a Feather.

When the raise is granted or just simply demanded, and the worker living in the tenement cannot pay his rent, he is put out into the street with his family and all his belongings.

That is called dispossession. Rent raises and dispossession go together. Landlords, courts, legislatures, rent raises and dispossession all go together.

If the tenants of Harlem want to fight rent raises and dispossession then they will have to fight the courts and legislature as well as the landlords.

The way to do this is to go together. To go together, we must have an organization that will be our own, and not belong to some petty politician. An organization which is the voice of the tenants who are workers is the Harlem Tenants' League.

Mrs. Williams knows that so she is a fighting member of this League.

Falling Ceiling.

MRS. WILLIAMS lives in an apartment which has been neither cleaned nor repaired since 1924. We will only remind you of what we have found in the other apartments we have already visited to give you an idea of what this "higher class" apartment is.

Nearly every year the ceiling falls down. Once the bathroom ceiling fell upon Mrs. Williams. In most instances she has had to fix it herself. Once when the landlord actually sent someone to repair it at his expense, the job was so badly done, that Mrs. Williams had to get someone to go over it.

The same trouble with the dumbwaiters.

Ashes on Kitchen Table.

"It's just great when you are sitting in your kitchen eating and ashes and all sorts of stuff comes down that shaftway right down on the table you're eating from," remarked Mrs. Williams.

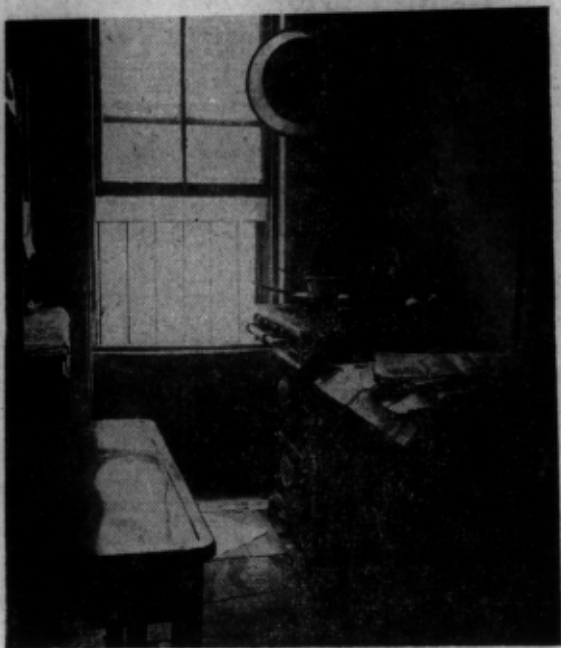
Eight years ago everything seems to have stopped working in this tenement. The sound of a bell is never heard here. One is lucky to find letters left for him in the mailbox.

"And lots of times we can't get any water at all. The water supply is low. If the water suddenly decides to stop when there is a fire, then we are all just out of luck."

There is no use repeating. What one describes of one tenement

Continued on Page Four

A Clean Kitchen in a Dirty Tenement



A kitchen in an apartment on Seventh Avenue. This is one of the few rooms that has ventilation. Notice how small it is. Ten people use it. Notice also how neat it is kept.

—Photo by Nippon Camera Club.

Courts and Landlords Work Together to Keep Rents Up

(Continued from Page One)

ment generally holds good for the others, with a few additions here and there.

18 At a Shot.

TO GIVE you a further example of what rent raises mean and how they are being handed out wholesale. At 241 W. 141st Street there is a large tenement. At present the tenants are paying about \$55 for five rooms, which are just as dilapidated as the others. The same story—no repairs unless you will accept a raise, the tenants pay for their own renovations.

About the end of 1928 eighteen families living in this house were notified of rent raises ranging from five to ten dollars, some of them even more than \$10. These raises are to be effective without improvements.

Take the case of Mrs. Bailey. She has been living there for 13 years and paid \$34 when she first moved in. She now pays \$55 and is expecting another raise at any moment. In her apartment the plumbing is so rotten that the walls and ceiling leak, there is a mouldy smell around the place, the ceiling falls periodically, there are plenty of holes in the wall and rats are abundant. The rooms are so bad that she cannot rent them out to lodgers.

Mrs. Stevens lives above her. When she first moved in 14 years ago she paid \$35 for five rooms. Last January she was already paying \$51, today she pays \$56. She pays for her own painting and papering.

On February 1 of this year the landlord notified her that the rent from then on would be \$63.

This is only an example of how rents have been rising all over Harlem. In back of these rent raises there is always the threat of dispossession. And to move means to pay a still higher rent, for the landlords always take advantage of new tenants, charge them more than anyone else in the building and thus pave the way for a general massacre.

Tomorrow there will be the beginning of the story of a rent fight. Tenants in Harlem are beginning to put up an organized resistance to the robbery of the landlords. Read what some militant tenants are planning to do with their landlord.