

A Century of Fake Housing Measures in New York State

(This is the twenty-third in a series of articles, appearing exclusively in the Daily Worker, reporting the conditions under which the workers are forced to live. Previous articles described the conditions in the tenement districts. The present article deals with the efforts put forward by the capitalists in the form of housing legislation in New York state. This series will conclude this week.)

By SOL AUERBACH.

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If any workers feels inclined to hold out the least bit of hope for relief in the housing situation from legislative quarters, let him remember that ever since 1835 there has been talk by politicians and reformers of relieving the housing situation in New York City and that every today violations of the first tenement law passed in 1860 are rampant.

From 1860 to 1919.

Let him remember that the Tenement House Law of 1861, hailed as an achievement in reform by some people, was as much scrap paper that might just as well have been thrown into the waste-basket standing beside the governor when he signed it.

Let him also remember that the new Multiple Dwellings Bill, which has just been signed by Roosevelt, to take the place of the 1861 law, is nothing but a brazen fake, intended

to deceive tenants, but the real purpose of which is to make apartment house building for the rich easier.

The First Fake.

In 1855 the health commissioner of New York City came to the surprising conclusion that there was a direct relationship between slum conditions and disease. The various investigating commissions appointed by the state and city could not help but be struck by the connection between bad housing and contagious

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disease like small-pox and infectious diseases like tuberculosis.

The first step in the series of fake housing laws was made when the state legislature, in the face of unnecessary opposition from the landlords and real-estate speculators, passed its law of 1867. It is an illuminating education in the bluffing ability of the legislatures of exploiters to study this law.

It is also a good insight into the conditions prevailing at that time, and how little conditions have changed despite that law and others.

Violated Today.

According to this law no building may be occupied as a tenement house unless every sleeping room had a ventilator or transom window of an area of three square feet; unless there were proper fire-escapes; unless there was ventilation in the main hall; there must be no leak in the roof; no less than 1 water-closet to every 20 occupants; yard space must be adequate; no basement or cellar rooms are to be occupied without a permit from the board of health and if occupied they must be seven feet high and have an external window. The building laws called for rooms having at least one window connected with the external air, cemented cellars and fire-proof construction.

Not a single one of these regulations, with the exception of the toilet clause, has been followed generally. Today, in most tenements, you will find at least one violation of the law of 1867.

Amendment Jokes.

In 1879, on the request of reformers, this law was amended to provide that no more than 65 per cent of a lot may be occupied by a building in order to furnish adequate lighting and air. It also provided that sleeping rooms must have 12 square feet opening directly on the public street or yard.

That amendment was a joke. It has been violated "legally." For the amendment also provided that a building could take up more than 65 per cent of a lot, if the board of health would give its permission. It was a very easy thing to get this "permission" with the result that the board of health saw no danger to "public welfare" by allowing buildings to go up covering 85 to 95 per cent of the lot. As for the ventilation provision, anyone who lives in an old law tenement knows that it is extremely difficult to find an apartment which has all of its rooms looking out into the open.

Lives Mean Nothing.

This provision was often deemed filled when rooms were constructed around a narrow shaftway, a yard wide, running the length of a five or six story building.

During all this time, and up to the Multiple Dwellings Bill of 1929, buildings were constantly being erected in violation of all the "laws" in existence.

More Jobs.

As the result of the investigation carried on by a commission appointed by the state in 1884, a law was passed in 1887. About all this law accomplished, was to hand out 15 more soft jobs to hanger-ons, by increasing the number of sanitary police for the state from 30 to 45. It also assured a constant flood of reports on housing by creating the "Tenement House Commission" to meet once a year. We must not forget, however, that it reduced the allotment of families per toilet from twenty to fifteen.

In the committee to "investigate" housing, appointed by the mayor of New York City in 1887 the leading member was William Waldorf Astor, the landlord of miles of tenements.

The Big Fake.

From then to 1900 there were sporadic attempts at reformist schemes, the "Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor" putting up a few "model" houses on west 68th and 69th Streets, which were model houses for the few who could pay to live in them.

By 1900 conditions in the tenements in New York City had become so bad that they achieved world-wide

notoriety. That set the landlords busy again and they had their state housing commission report on conditions that everybody knew of. As a result the Tenement House Law of 1901 was produced. It is supposed to have doomed the double-deck dumbbell apartments (box-like strung out unventilated cages), the community toilets, dark halls, and have made compulsory air shafts to supply air and light to all rooms, fire-proof public halls and stairs, and adequate disposal of garbage, etc.

And Today.

According to this law many of the tenements standing in 1901 are declared unfit for human habitation and should have been demolished. But today, in 1929, nearly all of these tenements are filled to capacity without having gone thru appreciable alterations.

At the beginning of 1928, 554,067 apartments in old law tenements (those built before the 1901 law went into effect) were occupied, housing about 2,500,000 people.

A Better One.

If you think that this is a good example of how little laws really count when passed and administered by a capitalist government, there is a still better one that even Clarence Stein, of the State Commission of Housing and Regional Planning, had to admit. In 1885 the New York Tenement House Commission reported as a "public menace" 23 tenements "covering 100 per cent of the lot and at the same time situated in middle of the block, in which the bedrooms are totally dark with no ventilation whatever." Now, 40 years later, 14 of these are still occupied. "There are thousands of similar tenements in New York City," says Stein.

The Tenement House Law went thru 150 amendments before the Multiple Dwellings Bill took its place in 1929. In spite of this law and its 150 amendments, 40 per cent of the families in New York City live in old law tenements, and Barry Parker, a housing expert for the British government, who has seen and investigated slums in every part of the world including Dublin and London, says:

Worst in World.

"The condition of life in any slums I have ever seen are better than they are in the slums of New York."

At present at the rate with which the old law tenements are being withdrawn from use, it would take more than a 100 years to get rid of them.

A Scrap of Paper.

THE Multiple Dwellings Law, which was finally signed by Governor Roosevelt last month, after two years of wrangling among real estate men and landlords and after having been used in political maneuvers in the state legislature, is the most useless scrap of paper ever filed.

Two years ago the state legislature formed a commission to examine and revise the Tenement House Law. As a result of the activities of this commission the Dwellings Bill was offered last year and defeated because of the objections raised by the representatives of realty interests. What the realty interests wanted was an annulment of the law of 1901 and legislation that would permit them to build higher class apartments with as little restriction as possible.

Landlords Approve It.

Accordingly, three additional members, appointed by the real estate boards of Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, were added to the commission and redrafted the law in such a way that it received the united support of the real estate and landlord interests. That means, of course, that the law provides absolutely no changes for the tenements in which the mass of workers are housed.

What the bill does do is allow greater bulk to buildings, raising the permitted height of apartment houses and it is so vague in regards to light provisions that under it

buildings can be built even below the minimum provided in the law of 1901.

Tenement Law for Rich.

The respectable citizens of this commission seemed to forget entirely about the old law tenements which make tenement conditions what they are. Even Clarence Stein, who is unusually honest for a state investigator, is forced to admit that "in regard to these buildings the proposed law does nothing or next to nothing," and he calls it a "tenement house law for the rich."

Even if the changes called for in this law are made "a large part of the rooms will still have no outside means of ventilation; the stairways will not be protected from fire; the fire-escapes will not serve as a safe means of escape; there will be no privacy or safety from disease in the toilets," says Stein.

That is the new housing law that was passed by the state legislature, signed by the governor. Like all the others passed before it it is a fake, designed with the double purpose of fooling the workers and helping the landlords.

SINCLAIR GETS SOFT JAIL JOB

Home Comforts for Big Oil Grafter

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either till the sentence is completed or his friends in political power exert enough pressure to get the "prisoner" out before time.

"Make Him Feel at Home."

The sensitive limbs of the oil baron will not be irritated by the prison garb which other prisoners are forced to wear. Two large bags of clothing were brought in by his chauffeur shortly after his arrival at a late hour Monday night.

"The doctor is a very nice man,"

Mary Wright confided. She was confident that she would "get along well" in his department.

Authorities continued to add more "home comforts" in the interest of the "dispenser." Resplendent in his silk pajamas, he went for a drink of water last night. "Is this what you drink out of?" he asked a prisoner gingerly as he saw him drink from a battered cup.

"Yes sir," was the reply. Sinclair was then given a private glass.

Chats on Horce Racing.

However, he complained petulantly that the pictures taken by newspapermen as he entered jail made him look as if his back was broken. But he was consoled by the conversation of other inmates with whom he discussed horseracing.

To assure Sinclair's friends that everything possible was being done for his comfort, G. T. Stanford, attorney for the Sinclair Oil Company, was taken on a tour of inspection of prison headquarters by the jail superintendent last night.

Sinclair is the only one of the principals involved in the Teapot Dome graft deal to go to jail. His sentence, however, was given not directly because of his activities in the swindle, but for refusal to answer certain incriminating questions put to him by a senate committee.

4 Oystermen Drowned of New Jersey Coast

BIVALVE, N. J., May 7.—Federal customs officers received word today that four oystermen had been drowned. Calvin Spedden, Jr., 23, was drowned near Fortescue when a foot chain snapped throwing him into the water.

Three other sailors were reported drowned when two light schooners collided near Port Norris throwing then men overboard. Reports of the accident were meagre.

RASKOB HAS NEW TRICK.

John J. Raskob, chairman of the democratic party national committee and the man who as head of General Motors made the workers pay dues in a company union, yesterday announced his latest trick to get the workers' wages. He invites them to join an investment company.