

# ***Workers Compelled to Live in Dark, Stuffy Rooms and Suffer Dangerous Congestion***

**By JAY LOVESTONE.**

It would require the most unbelievable feats of an over-worked imagination to give an even half-adequate picture of the wretched housing conditions in which the mass of workers find themselves in New York today.

The last three years have witnessed a steady degradation of an increasing number of people—a degradation which defies description.

The findings of the New York State Housing Committee investigating the housing conditions of 8,500 representative

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# Dark Rooms To Live In; Lot of Many Workers, Facts Show

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families unfold a picture of misery, congestion, denial of the most elementary needs to the children of the working class, disease-breeding conditions, and a break-down of the general standards of living.

My own investigation only adds evidence of an unspeakable environment which must be abolished without delay if a disastrous calamity is to be avoided for the working masses of America's greatest city.

## Conditions Horrify Investigators.

If one should walk thru a typical hall of the apartment houses inhabited by the majority of the workmen or even lower middle class and "white-collar slaves" he is greeted by grime and soot. The halls are dark; the paper is hanging off the walls. Clogged dumbwaiters, garbage piled deep in the cellars, and unbearable stench are common in the houses inhabited by the workers in the East Side, Harlem, Chelsea, Lenox, and many Bronx sections. Baby carriages, broken furniture, and old clothes are very often stored under the hall stairways.

I took a ride on the Second Avenue Elevated railroad and noted the tenements occupied by the workers. The fire escapes gave the impression of hailing scales of rust. They were all loaded with the belongings of the people who could not find sufficient room in their flats. It seemed almost unbelievable how many human beings could occupy such abominable shacks, such fire-traps. Yet a vacant flat is at a premium even in this section of the city.

## What They Call Homes.

The writer visited a worker's home at 193 Orchard street, in the heart of the working class section of the Lower East Side. Entering Mrs. B-n's house, I found a dark, stuffy, uncomfortable two-room flat. The ceilings were cracked. The holes in the walls were stuffed with rags to keep the draught out. The windows had no weather strips and their ropes were broken. The bedroom floors were full of holes.

Going over to a tenement, 294-300 Cherry Street, I entered a building which gave one the impression of being a big abandoned armory. Here I interviewed another tenant who had made repeated vain efforts to have the Tenement House Department compel the landlord to end the abominable conditions. The Hudson Guild is now intervening in the tenant's behalf. I found that the ceilings were filthy and the walls had not been painted for years. In the toilets the ceilings not only had their plaster off but their boards were coming down. There was no water in the toilets.

Father Ottavio Sylvester of the Parish of the Lady of Pompeii and St. Joseph's Chapel, testifying be-

fore the Housing Commission, told of the situation amongst the Italian workers in Brooklyn in these words: "The conditions are abominable, without light, without air, without anything; very small rooms where there are four, five, and six children some times, something terrible. The condition of Johnson Avenue, all of the rear houses in the same condition, toilets in yards, no baths, no heat."

In picturing the housing conditions in Harlem, one social investigator cited the following typical household 52 W. 112th Street): "When the tenant cooks, the pipes in the house are so bad that when the burner in the gas range is burning, she cannot have the other one. When the party on the first floor is getting water, she has to wait until they are all thru washing and doing their work before she can get water."

And Miss Blackman of the United Hebrew Charities, narrating her experiences before the State Commission said, in part: "Mrs. K. lived in an apartment where the chief amusement of the two younger children, aged 10 and two and a half years, was to crawl thru the holes in the wall; Mrs. P. lived in an apartment where the gas jet fell every once in a while and had to be dodged by members of the household."

## Landlords Stop Repairs.

Since the housing shortage has become acute the landlords have begun to take advantage of the tenants and have stopped practically all repairing of the dilapidated houses in which hundreds of thousands of workers are compelled to live.

"The present investigation reports with monotonous regularity that absolutely no repairing is done by the landlords; tenants in all the blocks have to do their own repairing and renovating, and have spent from \$25.00 to \$150.00, and in a few instances even more, to make their apartments habitable." The Housing Commission report then quotes a tenant: "We expect nothing from the landlord; not even a door-knob." Continuing its summary of the situation the Housing Commission pointed out: "When the plumbing is out of order, when the sink is broken, when the window panes are broken, when the plaster on the ceiling falls, when the roof leaks so that it is impossible to live in the room, the condition either remains or the tenant repairs it at his own expense. Even new tenants have had to move into an apartment which the landlord promised to clean up, but refuses to do so now that the tenant is in. 'We could not wait for the landlord and so did our own painting. We removed eight layers of paper from the walls.' In some instances the tenants repair upon promises of refund from landlord, but instead of refund they are asked for increase of rent. In general, no repairs have been made for three years."

In the preliminary report Director of Investigations Gove brings the intolerable situation home very effectively when he says: "The present investigation shows that houses and apartments in bad repair are not limited to the poorest blocks or to the old law tenements. From all blocks come reports of the landlords' refusal to repair falling plaster and broken ceilings, bad plumbing, leaking pipes, floors rotting from leaks, broken windowpanes, walls and ceilings excessively dirty, leaking roofs."

"The 1919-1920 report stated that the then existing emergency was only partially responsible for the bad housing conditions. The 1923 investigation shows that a progressive aggravation of these conditions has been going on. The apartments are in a state of worse repair than they were in 1920. It is easy to trace the connection between the increase of bad housing conditions and the housing emergency."

## Dangerous Congestion.

The extent of congestion from which the workers are suffering is inestimable. Before the housing crisis grew to its serious present proportions, when Dr. Royal C. Copeland, now United States senator, was commissioner of health, there were, according to the latter's estimate, at least 100,000 families that had been forced to double up. Dr. Copeland then said: "We have one square mile in the city where live 500,000 people, in the Lower East Side. There are thousands of families living there, twelve persons in three rooms, and four sleeping in the kitchen; and in hundreds of these homes they live in inside rooms without any light or ventilation."

The present health commissioner, Dr. Frank G. Monaghan, told the Housing Commission at its hearings last October that the survey of congestion made by his department "showed conclusively that homes had been broken up, doubling up of families had resulted, the lodger evil had increased by leaps and bounds, vacancies were few and far between, and the rent demanded for these vacant apartments was beyond the reach of those requiring homes, or a considerable portion of the vacancies were in a state of disrepair, making their use as habitations almost impossible."

Miss Ethel Ader of the Fairplay Rent Association told the Commission of a case where three related families lived in six rooms because "they could not any of them alone afford to pay the increase which the landlords demanded."

Mr. Bailey Burritt, the general director of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, told the State commission that his wide experience led him to believe that at least 40 per cent of the families were living in overcrowded conditions." Mr. Burritt further said: "The overcrowding of tenement houses has been accentuated. Many families have been obliged to go

to the small homes of their relatives, already overcrowded by the original tenants. Among our allowance families occupying three-room apartments, 20 per cent of those families number seven or more individuals living in three rooms." Mr. Burret told of many instances where eight, nine, ten, and even twelve people were living in three rooms.

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers made a survey of the housing conditions among 320 of its members. Mr. Harry K. Herwitz told the Commission that his investigation showed 35 per cent of the clothing workers living in two and three rooms. In one case there were persons in three rooms and in two other cases there were six persons in two rooms.

## Crowding Widespread.

A popular verse in New York runs:

"The trouble with this town is that There's too much family to a flat."

The survey made by the State Commission covered not only the poorest sections but also those blocks consisting of new law tenements in which the better paid workers were living. Yet the commission stated: "More than cold statistics confront the investigator as he opens the door of an apartment. Here is a four-room flat at one end of which is a front room, getting dim light from a narrow street, at the other end a kitchen with one window getting light from a court. In between are two small dark compartments called bedrooms. The rooms run consecutively, access from the front room to the rear being only thru the middle rooms, and in this amount of space covering approximately 250 square feet, lived ten people—four adults (two boarders) and six children."

## Eat In Shifts.

Director Gove thus completes the picture of life in this apartment: "They eat in the kitchen—in shifts. They sleep—father, mother and the baby under three years of age in the front room, the baby sharing their bed. There are two bedrooms left for five children and two boarders. The boarders demand a room for themselves. They pay \$8.00 a month, hence the two boys and their little sister of five sleep in one bedroom; and the two elder girls of 14 and 12 must sleep in the kitchen. The washing facilities for the whole family is the kitchen sink."

The Report describes the intolerable conditions of another apartment in this fashion: "The narration of the details of the wretched conditions under which this family is perforce living indicates not only a violation of all the principles of decency and sanitation, but challenges the very principle of the law of Archimedes. Of course all rooms are filled with beds, folded, unfolded or makeshift. In the small dark bedroom, lighted and ventilated by a small opening in the wall, is a three-quarter bed in which sleep two

boys of fourteen and ten and a girl of thirteen. To describe these conditions as 'detrimental to the public health and morals' is no idle phrase. These conditions mean being cramped in body and soul, they mean irritation and racked nerves, they mean contagion and infection. The indiscriminate sharing of rooms by both sexes and all ages, and the lack of privacy—these results of overcrowding are a menace to morality. It is true they existed in 1920; they are aggravated today."

But perhaps the most complete picture of the dangerous housing situation confronting the working people of New York was made by Dr. Haven Emerson in the Department of Health survey of congestion. Said Dr. Emerson:

"Thousands and thousands of people in the city are sleeping and living in apartments so dark that gaslight must be burned all day; so airless that in summer the families are forced to sleep on the roofs; so foul-smelling because of garbage in the hallways, in courts and streets, and because of adjoining stables or factories, that one of the only two windows in the whole flat has to be kept shut. The tenants must climb five or six flights of stairs to dispose of garbage, for the dumbwaiters are seldom in repair. Toilets for two to five families are in the halls or in the yards. The sanitary condition of the toilet is indescribable. There is insufficient water, neglected plumbing, no ventilation or light—these tell the condition without further description."

(The Third Article will deal with the harmful effects the present housing difficulties have had on the children, the families, the social life, the health and the general standards of living of the workers.)

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