

Mayor parties as tenants are left out in cold

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by Albor Ruiz

Receptions are nice. And on Monday, Mayor Bloomberg threw a really nice one in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. It was a happy occasion, especially because polls and pundits have probably made the incumbent feel that a second term is already in his pocket.

Not everything was fun and games around Gracie Mansion that day, though. A group of people picketed the mayor's official residence - and they were in no mood for celebrations.

Mainly Latino tenants, the group had a bold message: "We don't need fancy receptions or Spanish campaign ads; we need healthy homes." The mayor, as everyone knows, has spent many thousands of dollars on Spanish-language TV ads asking Latinos for their votes.

Gregoria Rosas was one of those protesting. And once you hear her story - only one among thousands - you realize that she had good reasons to join the picket line.

"For three years I've lived with my five children at Myrtle Ave. in Bushwick. Two months ago, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development found evidence of lead paint in my kitchen and my bathroom," Rosas said. "I have called my landlord and HPD over and over again to try to get help with repairs. I am still waiting."

How much longer she will have to wait is anybody's guess. Actually, there are about 60,000 "immediately hazardous" housing code violations in the city that, by law, must be taken care of within 24 hours. Yet fully 40% of them remain unrepaired for more than a whole year.

Organized with the help of Make the Road by Walking, Pratt Area Community Council, Neighbors Helping Neighbors and the NY Immigration Coalition, picketers called for stronger enforcement by HPD, and for the mayor to publicly support the Healthy Homes Act, legislation that creates more accountability for negligent slumlords and for HPD.

Despite the legislation having the backing of close to two-thirds of the City Council and almost 100 tenant, housing, community and immigrant organizations, Mayor Bloomberg - who most likely has never experienced problems with lead paint, rat infestation or exploitative landlords - opposes it.

Yet according to his own management report in fiscal year 2005, housing code violations have reached epidemic proportions in Bloombergland. Close to 125,000 heat and hot water complaints were lodged with the HPD last year by families suffering under freezing temperatures.

City housing law defines a lack of heat or hot water during the heat season as an emergency condition that must be corrected by the landlord within 24 hours.

Otherwise it must be corrected by HPD itself under its emergency repair program. The policy looks great on paper, but poor immigrants and people of color will tell anyone how rarely that law is enforced.

"The buck must stop somewhere," said Juan Haro, one of the leaders of the Movement for Justice in El Barrio, a group that is organizing East Harlem residents to fight for humane and

healthy living conditions. "And it is the office of the mayor that is ultimately responsible for enforcing the laws that protect the survival needs of the residents of our city."

El Barrio residents know from experience that they must expect the worst.

"But this year, residents of East Harlem will not wait shivering in their apartments for solutions from their negligent landlords, a stumbling HPD or any candidates who refuse to hear their voices and confront their problems," said Víctor Caletre, also one of the leaders of the Movement for Justice. Yesterday, the organization announced the Campaña Contra Hogares Helados (Campaign Against Freezing Homes) to combat the chronic shortage of heat and hot water that El Barrio residents endure every year.

Besides educating tenants about their rights, the campaign will establish a heat and hot water emergency action line. The hotline will connect residents of El Barrio to a network of members and tenants who are ready to take on abusive landlords and, if necessary, even go after HPD.

Contrary to our billionaire mayor, poor New Yorkers have little to celebrate. And no fancy reception or Spanish ad campaign will do anything to change that reality.