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## Angry tenants decry abusive landlords, housing market

by amy zimmer / metro new york  
JAN 24, 2007

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GREENWICH VILLAGE. Angry tenants from 12 neighborhoods held a “convention” yesterday to vote for the landlord they believe to be most abusive from a list they called the “dirty dozen.”

Tenants shared stories of landlords using such egregious tactics as shutting off heat and hot water, sending phony legal notices, pressuring for a buy-out or threatening residents based on their immigration status. They believe landlords are trying to boot them because the sooner they vacate, the sooner their apartments can be renovated and rented for more money.

The “winner” — determined by applause and stomping — was Adam Mermelstein, principal owner of TreeTop Development LLC. He has tried to clear out the 41 apartments at 188 South 3rd Street in Williamsburg, since buying it last year, to turn it into a luxury rental, according to tenant Jacqueline Hernandez.

“I was verbally and physically abused in front of my kids by an inspector [allegedly sent by Mermelstein] with a false ID,” Hernandez said. “They came to the door and said it was an [Dept. of Housing Preservation and Development] inspector to check the carbon monoxide detector and when he came in, he [hit] me against the wall.”

She claimed that Mermelstein has offered the remaining 18 tenants “a little bit” of money to get them out.

“It’s an expensive area now,” Hernandez said, “but we’re working families. We’re paying our rent. We’re not doing nothing wrong.”

Mermelstein already began renovating vacant apartments, though the Department of Buildings issued a stop work order for lack of permits. Mermelstein did not return calls for comment.

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A Harlem resident said his landlord changed the front door's lock but didn't give tenants new keys. A Bushwick resident said when she complained about roaches, her landlord told her to put them on a tortilla and eat them. A Chinatown housing advocate charged another landlord with intimidating tenants bringing frivolous lawsuits to housing court.

"As market rents rise, we're all under threat of harassment by landlords," said Michelle de la Uz, a board member for the Association for Neighborhood & Housing Development Inc., a coalition that organized the event. "We estimate each year that 10,000 units lose their affordability — that's about 30,000 people. Meanwhile, we're trying to build affordable housing, but we can't keep up with the loss."

### What's going on?

- De la Uz said the coalition is trying to get a law passed to allow tenants to go to take landlords to Housing Court over harassment.
- They have met with City Council Speaker Christine Quinn's office to discuss possible legislative approaches to protect tenants, said spokeswoman Maria Alvarez.

"[Quinn] has been a tenant organizer going a number of years back, so we are open to helping tenants," Alvarez said. "That being said, a great number of landlords are respectable business people."

- Between 2002 and 2005, there was a 20 percent drop in apartments renting for less than \$1,000, according to the NYC Housing Vacancy Survey.
- Housing advocates believe that 9 percent of this was due to annual rent increases as per the state's Rent Guidelines Board; they believe the other 11 percent — or 164,013 apartments — is a result of other factors including harassment.

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