

Cooper Square Committee

Summary of Organizing Work & Accomplishments in 2014



Members of the Organizing Department:
(L-R) Sarah Mitchell, Yonatan Tadele,
Harriet Putterman, Brandon Kielbasa

- **Major Organizing Efforts and Coalitions**

- Through partnering with St. Nick's alliance and the Urban Justice Center (UJC), Cooper Square Committee (CSC) created a much-needed campaign to reform the Department of Buildings (DOB) in 2014. For well over a year preceding this we had been working with community members to organize and draw attention to the problem of "construction as harassment." In 2014 we were able to further connect with some of our most steadfast allies (close to 20 organizations) throughout the City to formalize a campaign to reform DOB and work on ending "construction as harassment." The work we did last year is leading us to a pivotal year in 2015 where we will be looking to create new laws to better support tenants who are dealing with landlords who use the guise of construction to harass.



- CSC's organizing department was a lead community-group partner with the NYS Attorney General's (AG) office in their investigation of the "tenant relocater" Michel Pimienta. The organizing we did and information we provided helped the AG wage a precedent-setting investigation which led to the shuttering of Michel's operations. UJC and CAAAV were also partners in this effort.

- Led the organizing to help form the Mahfar Tenants Coalition. Both UJC and CAAAV are also involved with the amazing work happening here. This coalition, which includes half a dozen Samy Mahfar (SMA Equities) owned buildings, is fiercely pushing back against this landlord's attempt to vacate and renovate Lower East Side (LES) buildings *en masse*. In 2014 the tenants from these buildings called Mahfar to the table, used city agencies and local politicians to step up enforcement in their buildings, and held a powerful press conference in December 2014 after lead contamination was verified to have occurred in their buildings. The tenants of the Mahfar Tenants Coalition have proven to be some of the strongest fighters we've seen in 2014!



Photo credit: Zach Williams for The Villager

- CSC's work was a critical part of getting the AG to investigate both Steve Croman (9300 Reality) and Anthony Falconite (Croman's tenant relocater). We partnered with GOLES to support the Stop Croman Coalition and we used our connections with the AG to draw attention to these bad actors. CSC has been involved in organizing dozens of Croman-owned buildings throughout the years. UJC has also been a partner in this effort.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE →

- **Major Organizing Efforts and Coalitions (cont'd)**

- Helped organize the tenants of 170–174 E. 2nd St. to push back against the mega-landlord, Jared Kushner. This battle included many very public components, including: going in front of Community Board 3 repeatedly, holding a press conference in front of their building, and generally utilizing media attention to call to an end the severely mismanaged construction going on in these buildings. The work these amazing tenants did has laid the ground for a larger Kushner Coalition.



- Provided organizing support to the Marolda Tenants Coalition. With CAAAV and MFY Legal Services as the lead, CSC provided critical organizing support which eventually led to the TPU launching an investigation into Marolda Properties. Asian Americans for Equality was also a partner in this effort.

- **Smaller Organizing Efforts**

- Took part in the organizing to push back against “big real estate” at their symposium "Landlords Schooling Landlords" in March. A half dozen other tenants’ rights organizations from around the City worked together for this effort.
- Organized LES tenants to demand a 0% increase from the Rent Guidelines Board over the 3 months leading up to their June decision to issue what was ultimately the lowest increase in recent memory.
- Signed on to and maintained support role in citywide illegal hotel campaign, Share Better.

- **Notable Individual Tenants Association Work**

- Through again partnering with the UJC we helped the tenants of 309 E. 8th St. bring an HP Action against Croman in housing court regarding mismanagement of construction and other needed repairs. We also helped this determined tenants association pull Croman's COO to the table to demand that construction be handled in a safe manner.
- Assisted the residents of 59 E. 7th St. organize a tenants association after they found out their landmarked building was sold to a new landlord, Willowick Properties. In Oct. 2013, after noticing illegal renovations being done, they were able to get a Stop Work Order issued by the Dept. of Buildings.
- In partnership with GOLES, we helped the tenants of 60 Avenue B organize and hold Croman accountable during gut renovations occurring in their building.
- Helped the tenants of 128 2nd Ave. organize and push back against their landlord, ICON Realty.
- Organized the 99 E 7th St. tenants association to begin pushing back against their landlord, Jared Kushner.
- Assisted the tenants of 219 E. 5th St. with filing an HP Action to restore heat and hot water to their building.
- Did outreach to hundreds of tenants and provided ongoing support to over a dozen tenants associations throughout the LES.

- **Additional Notable Accomplishments**

- Superbly utilized media in campaigns to draw attention to the housing crisis we have in New York City.
- In 2014 there were over three dozen articles that directly referenced CSC's work.
- Here are just some of the publications that covered our work this year: The New York Times, The Guardian, The New York Daily News, New York Observer, Urban Omnibus, The Independent, DNA Info, The Villager, and The Lo-Down

- We completed CSC's first formal leadership development program. Training sessions included: Housing in a Political Economy, Organizing 101, and How Leaders Drive Organizing.
- We were proud to have collaborated with the UJC and Picture the Homeless, in addition to Tom Angotti and Joan Minieri, to make this wonderful training series happen.
- Twelve tenant leaders from the LES participated in and graduated from the series. We were so glad to have them attend and be a part of this!



Special Projects

In addition to all of this, our lead organizer, Brandon Kielbasa, embarked on the following special projects:

- Wrote three articles on tenants' rights and organizing. One opinion piece published in The Villager ("Aren't the Millionaire Landlords More the Problem?") in May; and two pieces about organizing for Met Council on Housing's newspaper *The Tenant* ("How Speculative Landlords Work — And How Tenants Can Fight Back" & "LES Tenants Resist Kushner") in June and October.
- Did talks for The Tenement Museum's educators and for Parsons College's students studying Urban Ecologies.
- Sat on two panels: In November WE ACT's (environmental justice) Healthy Homes Summit "Closing Plenary: Uplifting our Allies"; and NYS Senator Daniel Squadron's fall community forum on housing.
- With creative partner Emily Gallagher, conducted a tenants rights walking tour that highlighted organizing victories that tenants have had throughout the LES. The tour, which was done twice in 2014 (and will be conducted twice more in 2015), provides essential "know your rights" material in conjunction with essential information on how to organize around housing issues.
- Gave a presentation with creative partner Emily Gallagher about this tenants' rights walking tour, as a tool for educating, in November at "Cultural Organizing for Community Change," an annual full-day workshop by Arts & Democracy Project and Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY.

