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City Limits WEEKLY  
Week of: [December 22, 2003](#)  
Number: 413

## GANGING UP ON A GRINCH: TENANTS AND WORKERS UNITE

An unusual coalition has sprung up to fight mega-landlord Fred Ohebshalom. > *By Janelle M. Nanos*

Christmas came early for landlord Fred Ohebshalom--but it wasn't very merry. Members of Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ gathered outside his midtown office last Thursday, toting an oversized Christmas stocking with an eviction notice stuffed in its furry brim.

Since his February purchase of 12 buildings in northern Manhattan, the Bronx and Westchester County, they say, Ohebshalom has let building services deteriorate, ignoring residents' complaints about rodents, hazardous construction and flooding for so long that some were forced to move. Those who remained in his 750 units say they have faced harassment, and more than 10% have been threatened with eviction.

But they're not the only ones angry with Ohebshalom, a principal in real estate firm Acquisition America and president of Empire Management, which oversees its properties. Union leaders say he has laid off three full-time employees and cut the salaries, benefits and health coverage of several others.

Ohebshalom declined repeated requests to comment for this story.

The landlord's two-pronged assault has created an unusual coalition between tenants and workers, one that could set a precedent for housing battles throughout the city. The union actually footed the bill for several of the tenants' eviction defense, estimated at \$200 to \$300 per case. "We became involved in cases that were patently frivolous," said Ari Holzblatt, organizer for Local 32BJ. "We see ourselves in alliance with the tenants and are finding ways to work together."

That help was a saving grace for Yadira Bonilla, a resident of 664 West 163rd Street, who received an eviction notice just weeks before giving birth to her second child. "They were making false accusations and offering us money so that we would leave our homes," she said. After several attempts at reconciliation, Bonilla appeared in Housing Court on October 2. Her case was thrown out and she was allowed to stay in her home.

Sadik Mustafa wasn't so lucky. The security guard was employed at 515 and 509 West 110th Street, but was fired when management changed hands. "I worked in those buildings for seven years and I never had a complaint," he said. "But they had no use for me. I'm 60 years old. Who's going to hire me now?"

On October 21, Local 32BJ filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) alleging unfair labor practices by Acquisition America. NLRB reps say the case is under consideration and a decision is expected soon.

Government officials have also stepped in. Assemblymembers Scott Stringer and Daniel O'Donnell helped coordinate protests and arrange off-site meetings for tenants fearful of organizing in their buildings. Stringer's office also successfully pushed the city's Department of Buildings and the Department of Housing Preservation & Development to conduct a joint top-to-bottom inspection

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of 244 West 72nd Street, one of the more run-down properties. They hope their findings will empower other tenants to report violations and build a stronger case against Ohebshalom.

“He’s made a lot a people’s lives miserable,” said John Hamill, deputy communications director for Local 32BJ. “A responsible landlord, an honest wage and benefits is not asking for much.”



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