

\$10 Weekly Wages, \$35 Rents Mark Conditions in Harlem

Daily Worker Reporter Visits Homes, Tells of Suffering

By Angelo Herndon

"Of course, we are all crowded up, but it's not as bad as some of the houses in this block," declared a Negro mother as she led the way into her basement apartment.

Her husband is superintendent of the house and takes care of 18 families most of whom fit in the category of the "permanent roomer population."

There are seven in the family, the father and mother, two girls and three boys. The oldest boy, who is 17, just graduated from high school and would like to get a job. The mother stays home and takes care of the children. The only income they have is the \$30 earned every month by the father.

They live in the basement in five small rooms for which they do not have to pay rent.

"We would like to do better, but what is there to do?" she said. "Look at my oldest son. He is such a nice boy and wants a job so bad."

The son took out his diploma and showed it to me.

LIKE A CAVE

Entering the basement is just like going down hundreds of feet under the earth. It is dark and damp and the foul odors that have accumulated over a period of years are enough to stifle an elephant.

Frequently, toilets get stopped up in some of the apartments and the water in the sewer tank overflows into the basement. It is not unusual for days to go by before the landlord will repair the leak in the sewage tank.

The five rooms in which this family lives are very small and full of old furniture, most of which was fit for the junk man. The kitchen was certainly not a place to encourage one's appetite. Rusty pots and pans seemed to have occupied all the available space.

There was no evidence of food being around. A little girl was standing over near the stove. Apparently, she was hungry, for she kept on licking plates and picking up bread crumbs.

The family seems to be resigned



CRACKED WALLS IN A HARLEM TENEMENT

to its tragic situation with fatalistic calm. And the husband explains it:

"A friend of mine living in the Bronx once asked me to invite him to my home. But I would never think of doing that. The place is too awful and my self respect wouldn't let me do it anyway."

In the house next door, a Negro couple just recently got married. They live in what is considered to be one of the most up-to-date apartment houses in the block.

The husband is an elevator operator and makes \$40 a month. The wife is unemployed. There are three rooms, a bath and kitchen. Rent is \$55 a month. The floors in the apartment are warped and rough with a smattering of shellac here and there. There is a covering of cheap paint on the walls that does not hide the dirt accumulated between the first and last paintings. There is no sunlight at all in the apartment and very little ventilation.

I asked the husband how he managed to pay the rent and if he couldn't get a better place for the

same price. He answered almost as any person living in Harlem would answer.

"If I moved to another place it would all be the same, except the rent might be higher. We rent out two of the rooms for \$5 a week and we live in the other one."

"But how do you and your wife live on \$35 a month?"

"Well, we just manage somehow."

He told me that he was still paying on his furniture.

"The cash price was \$65 but I bought it on the installment plan and that ran it up to \$86. That's not so much because I only have to pay \$8 a month on it."

When I observed that these expenses left him only \$21 at the end of each month for food, medicine and other necessities, he explained reluctantly:

"You see, my wife plays the numbers and sometimes she hits. That helps out a lot. In Harlem, the landlords not only rob the people of their earnings, but they also forced them into all kinds of rackets to make a living."