



LAHD rental property policy assumes that all construction prior to that year has "a presence of lead-based paint."

Sledgehammering walls thus subjects tenants to possible lead poisoning. BASTA attorney Ben Ramm says, "Don't spray lead dust where children are. The lack of respect is shocking."

Occasionally, the conditions get even more heinous. Bramzon cites one 17-unit building, where almost 80 tenants were forced to share three common showers that had worms coming up from the flooring, mold covering the ceiling, and a rotting door to the shower room. "We've seen apartments where every wall is crawling with hundreds of roaches, even during the daytime," he says.

To combat uninhabitable conditions, BASTA is aggressive with its counsel. "You won't find another nonprofit who will tell tenants to stop paying rent," says Bramzon. "If the conditions merit a rent strike to force the landlord to make repairs, we have no hesitation to implement one." At any given time, 150-200 BASTA clients are withholding rent.

#### LANDLORDS POSE A UNIQUE CHALLENGE

With homes increasingly unaffordable citywide, more people have resorted to renting. Rent stabilization controls how much landlords can raise rents, but this can lead to hostile relationships with tenants, where landlords are quick to evict. According to the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, L.A. County landlords file over 80,000 evictions annually. Landlords regularly base eviction filings on technicalities or easily remedied issues. Bramzon remem-

bers one elderly woman who had lived in her apartment for over 15 years, when her landlord attempted to evict on the basis that a small bookshelf behind the front door was a fire hazard. "Our argument at trial was that the landlord and his two maintenance personnel who had repeatedly entered the apartment should have moved the bookshelf two feet to get it out of the way," says Bramzon. "We won in a jury trial. We have also had evictions for as little as 56 cents. And yes, we won that case too."

With no financial incentive to improve living conditions for longstanding tenants, some landlords allow buildings to fall into disrepair, only making structural repairs under court order. Bramzon says he's constantly surprised by the "cruel audacity of the landlords ... They simply want to get rid of the tenant while deferring maintenance."

For undocumented immigrants, there's also the looming fear that landlords will call Citizenship and Immigration Services and get them deported. Lupe says, "The landlord was going to call immigration to send all of us back, since we were suing him. Danny told us not to be afraid, that he was going to protect us, and he did."

Bramzon makes it clear that BASTA isn't interested in making peace with landlords. "Other nonprofit groups have the philosophy to do what's just and fair, even if it benefits the landlord. The court decides what's fair. We're interested in helping tenants."

Some attorneys who have faced BASTA question Bramzon's tactics. John Greenwood of Dennis P. Block & Associates, a favorite firm for landlords, says, "Very often, they take anybody's

cases and grind a settlement out of the landlord, based on nuisance factor, not based on what the case is about."

And according to Frank Rubin, who has 33 years of experience representing landlords, "[Bramzon's] not encouraging the owners to do the work, he's just terrorizing them."

But landlords often fight back. Last December, while Bramzon and BASTA attorney John Wollman were inspecting a property, the landlord's attorney instituted a citizen's arrest for trespass. "The police department implemented it," says Bramzon, "ignoring the fact that we were looking for our client, who resided in the building, and ignoring a civil code that makes an exception to the trespass law by making an exemption for tenant's advocates."

These types of actions don't dissuade BASTA. After making bail, BASTA attorneys continued to gather evidence against the landlord. "We caught the landlord making illegal repairs, in violation of a court order," recalls Bramzon. "As attorney Ben Ramm took photos of the construction, he was grabbed from behind and beaten by a group of workers." Concerned tenants dragged an unconscious Ramm to safety, says Bramzon, and stashed him in an apartment until the police arrived, by which point the workers fled, never to be seen again.

Frank Rubin respects BASTA, but questions whether the organization really helps to change clients' lives. "They're all bright, good litigators, but do these people have a better place to live at the end of the day, or do they just have \$5,000 or \$10,000 in their pocket? How long is that going to last?"

But Bramzon has no intention of toning down BASTA's no-holds-barred approach. "We've had enough of landlords showing a lack of humanity to tenants," he says. **NA**

[www.bastaforjustice.org](http://www.bastaforjustice.org)

# STAN LERNER'S CRIMINAL



## BOOK SIGNINGS AT:

### Metropolis Books

April 17th, 2008

**Signing and Reading**

11:00am-2:00pm and 5:00pm-8:00pm

440 S. Main Street Los Angeles

213.612.0174

### Book Soup

May 1st, 2008

**Book Signing at 7:00pm**

8818 Sunset Blvd, Hollywood

310.659.3110

Stan Lerner's Criminal is also available at  
**[www.criminalthebook.com](http://www.criminalthebook.com)**

© 2008 Lerner Wordsmith Press