

Mass eviction of Detroit's poor

Tenement to be turned into upscale apartments

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On the morning of December 11, more than 100 residents of a city-owned apartment building in downtown Detroit were subjected to a mass eviction into freezing temperatures and icing drizzle. At 9:30 a.m., Wayne County Sheriff's Deputies began piling the residents' possessions into the gutter in front of their building.

Robert Jones, a phlebotomist who has worked in local hospitals for 11 years, is now unemployed. He told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he had lived in the building for two years, paying \$95 per week for a single room with no kitchen. He lost everything. His friend Kirt Wright lived and worked in the building doing maintenance and security, on and off, over the past 15 years. Wright worked the desk from midnight until 8 a.m. for \$50 plus his room. Ronald Walker, who works as a temporary laborer through Labor Ready services, lived in the building for two and a half years. He also lost all his possessions. He, too, has no place to live.

When an eviction takes place, one expects to hear the tragic story of a worker who has lost his job and fallen behind in his rent or mortgage payment. But while many of them faced difficult circumstances, the residents at 71 West Willis were not in arrears. They were evicted on the basis of false accusations of criminal behavior. The real criminality, however, was occurring elsewhere. The city has owned the building since 1997, but for five years has permitted an absentee landlord to collect the rent without securing the renters against eviction. Despite the obvious injustice, the city made no provision, even for temporary shelter, for its tenants.

The scant supply of affordable housing drives up the price, even for the most minimal accommodations. A resident at the West Willis building, for example, could pay as much as \$95 per week for one room with no kitchen facilities. The 1990s saw the lowest rate of housing starts in the city's modern history, with just over 6,000 units constructed in the decade. Very few of those units are available to people of low incomes.

Clifford Groze, a Vietnam veteran, is one of those who was evicted. He returned from the Veterans Administration hospital that afternoon to find that everything he owned was gone. He told the WSWs that he had been a resident of the building for the past five years. Receiving \$306 per month for a military service-related disability, he could just afford the rent of \$310. But in his case also, the rent was paid. "The only thing I have left is what is on my back," he said. His discharge papers, all of his documents and personal possessions are gone.

K.C. Johnson, a resident on and off for 18 years, was particularly bitter about the role of the city administration. When the evictions took place, he was working as building manager, collecting rents and doing maintenance for the former owner, Terry Harder. Apparently, Harder had entered into an agreement in 1993 to bring a state-funded shelter to the building. K.C. said he thought Harder was unaware that by doing so he was passing ownership to the State of Michigan. In 1997 the state turned ownership of the building over to the City of Detroit. Throughout this time, Harder continued doing maintenance and collecting rent. "The city was supposed to provide money for the residents to relocate," said K.C. "No matter what, they deserve a place to live. What the city did was wrong."

There was only a brief report on the evening news and no mention of the incident in local papers. But the message from the city administration, headed by Democrat Kwame Kilpatrick, was clear. Humanitarian concerns would not be allowed to stand in the path of corporate investment and "redevelopment" of downtown Detroit. The apartment building was to be cleared out to make way for its sale and renovation into luxury apartments.

But the more specific motivation, for both the callous character and the timing of the mayor's action, became obvious the following morning. The *Detroit Free Press* detailed corporate investment plans under way with the banner headline: "Cash will flood into riverfront." The *Free Press* wrote: "This time, there's money. That's what's different, and so exciting, about today's rollout of a grand vision for Detroit's riverfront." The mayor's eviction order proved to be nothing less than his pledge of support for the corporate entrepreneurs, who are joining in the predatory enterprise of developing the

downtown area. The *Free Press* article did not mention the plight of the people who had been evicted the previous day. But this is not to say that the editorial staff was unaware of the situation at the apartment building.

A front-page story three weeks earlier, in the November 19 edition of the *Free Press*, was headlined: “Midtown revival is facing challenge from city blight—Investment spurs efforts to stop drug sales in Detroit apartments.” The paper portrayed the residents of 71 West Willis as a collection of dope dealers, pimps and prostitutes. The *Free Press* article reported approvingly on the city’s intent to drive from the area the marginally employed, the elderly and the disabled. The justification was “upscale” development. The co-chair of the Midtown Alliance, attorney Kenneth Davies, was quoted. “The future of the city is dependent upon the development of the downtown area,” he said. “And you’ve got to have a middle-income class of people that choose to be in Detroit.”

The day after the mass eviction, Kilpatrick—together with Matt Cullen, General Motors Corporation general manager of economic development and enterprise services, and John Marshall III, president of the Kresge Foundation—announced plans for major investments by the corporations, the city, and state and federal governments.

Decent, low-cost housing in Detroit is in extremely short supply, and virtually nonexistent for those who can only afford to pay \$95 a week. The Coalition on Temporary Shelter—Detroit, known as COTS, was formed in 1981 in response to the rising number of homeless in Detroit. Although these statistics are understandably difficult to compile, COTS reports 5,800 homeless in Detroit, with only 3,700 emergency beds available. The organization itself provides shelter for 2,000 people annually.

But such statistics are regularly concealed by the local media. Instead, the city’s poor and homeless are often depicted as criminals. Following the eviction, the NBC local affiliate, Channel 4, echoed a similar theme on the evening news. Against the image of the huge pile of personal belongings, the report focused on the comments of an individual who applauded the action of the city, and accused the building residents of “big drug usage, big drug sales and big prostitution.”

In truth, the majority of residents are former factory workers, marginally employed, disabled or veterans. When 18 major auto plants in Detroit closed down during the 1980s, more than 43,000 well-paying jobs were lost, leaving many with only part-time or temporary work.

Evicted resident Rovin Lawson, for example, works as a handyman. “We were told by the city that the reason they are evicting everyone is because there’s drugs and prostitution in the building,” he said. “But I am sure that goes on in other buildings in the city, and I am sure they are not evicting people out of those.”

Increasing numbers of the general population struggle in

poverty because of corporate decisions to close factories, or move production elsewhere. These workers can expect little or nothing in the form of public assistance. By contrast, it has become common practice for the municipal, state and federal governments to use public funds to subsidize corporate investments. Government handouts to the stockholders have been financed by cuts in schools, hospitals and city services. Notable examples include General Motors’ Poletown plant and Chrysler’s Jefferson Assembly on the city’s east side, each of which received \$500 million in tax abatements.

When General Motors moved its world headquarters to the Renaissance Center on the riverfront in 1998, the plans for more subsidies to the giant corporation were well under way. The state has pledged \$140 million for freeway improvements and a park next to GM’s complex, and the federal government will fund seawall improvements and a new Port Authority terminal in the vicinity. Under Mayor Kilpatrick, the city has weighed in with the largest single contribution, \$180 million, for parking and relocating a concrete company from the area. Not one penny, however, has been set aside for the people who can be seen wandering the streets, or huddled in abandoned buildings; or for those who will join them because of the mayor’s action last Wednesday morning.

To destroy the evidence that the apartment’s residents had been thrown out, the city sent a truck the following Saturday to remove their possessions from the scene of the eviction. Most of their things remained piled in the street because the majority of the building’s former tenants have nowhere to go. And now they don’t even know if their things have been taken to the dump.

The building falls within the corridor of lower Woodward Avenue connecting Wayne State University to the new baseball and football stadiums, the new Compuware world headquarters, now under construction, and the new location for General Motors world headquarters. Now that huge sums are pouring into the redevelopment of this area, apartment buildings have become the targets of speculators seeking to enter the lucrative market for luxury condominiums and lofts.

The developers and Mayor Kilpatrick are working at the behest of some of the richest people in the world, such as billionaire entrepreneur Mike Illitch, owner of the Detroit Tigers and Detroit Red Wings, who has purchased large areas in this part of the city. The essential character of redevelopment in downtown Detroit, under the city’s Democratic administration, came brutally home last week with the eviction at 11 West Willis, exposing the contempt with which these corporate developers approach the area’s poor residents.



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