

# Elderly man resisting eviction shot by Detroit police

Sheila Brehm, Jerry White  
5 August 2009

A 78-year-old man resisting eviction from his apartment at a senior citizen complex was shot multiple times by Detroit police last Thursday.

The news media initially reported that an “unidentified man was taken to Detroit Receiving Hospital in critical condition.” Since then authorities have refused to release the name of the victim or any details on his condition, leaving open the possibility he may have succumbed to the gunshot wounds.

The man lived at River Towers, a 14-story apartment building on East Jefferson Avenue near downtown Detroit, which overlooks the Detroit River. Apartments at the River Towers rent for \$600 and \$700 a month for a 544 and 705-square foot apartment respectively. After receiving an eviction notice Thursday afternoon, reportedly for failing to pay his rent, the elderly man barricaded himself in his eighth floor apartment, according to the police, who said he was armed.

Although the standoff involved a senior citizen, one who, according to at least some reports, may have been suffering from dementia, police organized a massive siege of the apartment building. Scores of cops, including at least one special weapons and tactics (SWAT) team, were involved, while helicopters circled overhead, and an armored vehicle was reportedly made ready.

After more than five hours, at 9:45 pm, police threw tear gas canisters into the apartment, which the man reportedly threw back. Claiming the victim fired first, police stormed the apartment with guns firing. In a video aired on WXYZ-TV at least a dozen shots could be heard coming from the apartment.

Residents were not allowed to leave or enter the building for several hours, and the surrounding streets were closed off. Wardell Montgomery, a resident of

the apartment complex, told the WSWS, “I can tell you how the residents I have spoken with feel about this. We believe there was an excess amount of police force. I would say there were about 100 police. We heard the new Detroit Police Chief Police Warren Evans was there. I saw at least 10-12 police cars, but they were also on the other side of the building. Why so many? I believe it was to show their force, to use this incident as a training exercise if things get out of hand in Detroit. This was not about protecting seniors. It was like a military operation.”

Montgomery said he called the security office in the apartment complex to find out what happened to the man. Who was he? Is he still alive? “The phone was never answered, so I went to the office and was told, ‘We are not at liberty to say what happened.’”

While the police siege was taking place, a waitress at the restaurant across the street expressed her shock over the inhuman treatment of the old man. “I heard on the news that a 78-year-old is being evicted and that is why all the police are here,” she told the WSWS. “Where is this man supposed to go?”

During the standoff, Detroit’s local radio and television news broadcasted up-to-the-minute reports from the scene of the “barricaded gunman.” After the police shot the man, nothing but short news items appeared. No city official, including Mayor David Bing, made any statement about the incident.

The massive police operation and the virtual silence in the news media afterwards is a sign of sensitivity over the explosive social tensions building up in the city, and, in particular, concern over growing popular opposition to evictions and foreclosures. In 2006 and 2007, the Detroit area led the nation in foreclosures, and the Obama administration’s forced bankruptcies of General Motors and Chrysler will only exacerbate the

crisis.

The shooting of an elderly man trying to defend his home provides a glimpse of the devastating conditions facing the working class. Detroit has been ravaged by the long-term decay of American manufacturing. Today, more than a third of the population lives in poverty and more than 25 percent are unemployed. These are the official figures. The reality is even worse.

The senior complex is home to many retired auto workers, teachers, federal, state and city workers who fought during their working years to achieve a relatively decent standard of living. Such workers—who in many cases help subsidize the incomes of their children, who are forced to work low-wage jobs or who are unemployed—are being hammered by cuts in Medicare and Medicaid, rising health care costs and the slashing of employer-paid pension and retiree medical benefits.

Ironically, the River Towers sits next to the United Auto Workers misnamed “Solidarity House” headquarters. The \$15 million headquarters—cordoned off from the city’s mostly impoverished population by high gates, security cameras and armed guards—is the home to the top UAW officials, who just negotiated massive concessions for hundreds of thousands of retirees and their dependants, including the elimination of dental and optical coverage.

The Detroit shooting is the latest in a series of such cases throughout the US.

In May of this year, 45-year-old Mark Fussner was shot to death by a police sniper after a five-hour standoff in the downriver Detroit suburb of Allen Park. The confrontation started after Fussner shot and wounded a police officer who arrived with court officers to serve him with an eviction notice after the banks foreclosed his house. A Michigan State Police chopper landed nearby, a tank was at the scene, and a robot with cameras was sent into the home to see how many weapons Fussner had before police fatally wounded him.

In March 2009, 91-year-old Addie Polk died months after police said she shot herself during an eviction in Akron, Ohio. Polk had missed payments on a Countrywide Home loan on the 101-year-old home that she and her late husband, a retiree from Goodyear Rubber, purchased in 1970. Fannie Mae, which took

over the mortgage, filed for foreclosure. As deputies arrived to escort her out of her home on October 1, 2008, the elderly woman reportedly went to her bedroom and shot herself in the chest two times. After Polk’s case sparked widespread outrage, Fannie Mae decided to halt the foreclosure and forgive the outstanding balance on her loan. Shortly afterwards Polk was forced to move into a nursing home.

While handing trillions to Wall Street bankers who precipitated the collapse of housing prices and the massive wave in foreclosures and evictions, the White House and local governments have done nothing to provide relief for millions facing the loss of their homes.

The police shooting in Detroit underscores the need to develop a political movement of the working class to defend its most basic interests. This is the strategy that Socialist Equality Party Detroit mayoral candidate D’Artagnan Collier has fought for throughout his campaign.

*The authors also recommend:*

End all utility shutoffs! For a socialist response to the economic crisis

[24 July 2009]



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**