

Opposition mounts to Detroit library closures

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Dozens of residents of Detroit's east side participated in a spirited picket outside the Monteith branch of the city's public library Tuesday afternoon to oppose plans to close the facility. The 80-year-old library located on Kercheval Avenue serves as a hub of social and cultural life in a community that has been devastated by factory closures and cuts in public services.

Citing a funding crisis, the Detroit Library Commission has targeted 6 of 23 branches in the city for closure. The commission claims that the layoff of 82 staff earlier this year makes it impossible to manage all the remaining branches.

The protest at Monteith is the most recent in a series across the city against library closures. On October 1, local residents gathered outside the Chandler Park branch near Harper and Dickenson to oppose the closure of that library. Northwest Detroit residents have staged several protests against the closure of the Jessie Chase branch on West Seven Mile Road.

In addition to the Monteith, Chase and Chandler Park branches, the others targeted for closure are Lincoln, Mark Twain Annex and Richard.

The announced plans to close Detroit libraries comes as the administration of Democratic Mayor David Bing moves ahead with plans to shut down whole areas of the city considered "unviable." The aim is to drive residents out of targeted neighborhoods by shutting schools, recreation centers and fire stations and curtailing other essential services.

The Monteith branch, named for the first president of the University of Michigan, John Monteith (1787-1868), is the largest branch library in the city. An impressive structure, it is constructed of Plymouth granite with a spacious and well-lighted interior. Stained glass panels in the bay window trace the history of printing and of the book. The multipurpose room upstairs serves as a meeting place for a host of community organizations.

The library is home to a large collection of books, CDs and videos, and is a popular destination for students and other neighborhood residents seeking to browse the collection or use the computers for job search or homework.

Jay Henderson, one of the organizers of the protest and president of the neighborhood block clubs association, told those assembled that he hoped to see a big turnout of local residents at the scheduled October 18 library commission meeting to show opposition to the closure.

He told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Last month, we went to a hearing, and that is when we found out about the closing. We want to make a factual case about the importance of this library, because the people that are closing it don't seem to know what goes on here."

Linda Cooper, another organizer of the protest, said, "We came together to show support for our library. A lot of the people that came today are residents of the neighborhood. We have many different programs: the Junior League, karate and sewing. The Junior League comes in from the suburbs for a tutoring program. They have invested thousands and thousands of dollars into fixing up this building, and I am sure they will be upset if the library closed.

"It is a place to keep kids safe, a place to do their homework. The people care. There is an excellent staff. It's like a family."

"We decided to piggyback with the kind of campaign they organized at Chase Library. We are organizing a petition drive and holding the rally to gather support. We want churches and others to bring buses of people to the city library commission meeting next week. This library is the only resource center that we have from Alter Road [in the east] to Van Dyke [in the west] and from Jefferson [in the south] to the I-94 Expressway [in the north]—more than a dozen square miles of the City of

Detroit].

“There seems to be a lack of interest from the city for the far east side. They plan to push people out. Garbage pick-up is a problem; the streetlights are out. It is really scary. It seems they want to punish the children because the city is so messed up. We hear allegations of gross mismanagement and ongoing investigations of contracts, but when Jay tried to get someone from the city to come and speak to the block club meetings, they did not want to come.”

Patrick Giles, a neighborhood resident and former student at Kettering High School, told the WSWS, “I think closing the library is crazy. This is where kids come after school. They are closing all the recreation centers. It is not fair to the people of this area or to the people of the other areas where they are closing libraries.

“I use this library. It is hard looking for a job. Closing a library is going to make it harder for people looking for work.”

Nancy Orr does tutoring on a volunteer basis with children in the neighborhood. She said, “I am with the Eastside Tutors. We are all volunteers and do tutoring Monday and Tuesday afternoons for one hour.

“When this library closes, these kids will have no outlet. A lot don’t have cars. If they can’t walk, we can’t tutor.

“The kids come here as a safe haven. They can talk about what is going on at home and in the neighborhood. What they are doing is taking a library away from people who need it.”

William Schulte, another tutor, commented, “This library is crucial. Last year, I got a wonderful letter from a mother who said that because of this program her son made it on the honor role for the first time.”

Ms. Mathews, a local resident, said, “I appreciate everyone coming out here to support the library. I’m here because ever since I’ve been in Detroit I have been coming to this library. I’ve lived in this neighborhood for 50 years, just down the street. My children, my grandchildren, my great grandchildren live around here and they all use this library. It’s all about taking care of ourselves and our family, in helping the children. We all come here to get DVDs, CDs, and to use the computer. I don’t have a computer, I can’t afford one, and so I depend on this library. If people are using the libraries, like they are here, they should add

libraries, not subtract them.”

David Wardlaw told the WSWS: “We have tutoring programs and other events. We have older adults who come in here to read the newspapers all the time. The place is a drop-off point for the school bus. Kids go inside the library and use the facility while they wait for their parents to pick them up. The computer room is always full.

“I come here at least three times a week to do my job search. I have been unemployed for a year and a half and depend on the computers. You have to have access to a computer these days to apply for jobs.

“I also like to read, and I read mostly non-fiction. The last one I read was *Too Big to Fail*. The book takes the reader inside things going on in the boardrooms.

“It is the disproportionate way that money moves around in this country that is the problem. They are taking it from the poor and moving it to the rich. What I mean by that is that when they take the social programs from the people yet you leave tax loopholes, subsidies, the kickbacks and so forth, you are just taking from the poor.

“We have a situation here in Michigan where Governor [Rick] Snyder signed a bill to remove 41,000 people from welfare, yet they left in place tax breaks for the rich and the corporations. To put 41,000 people off welfare is not going to save a whole lot of money. They did it because they can. They think ‘before I give back what I have, I will take everything I can from you.’ ”



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