

Detroit residents face eviction as officials gentrify downtown region

Lawrence Porter
27 April 2013

Detroit officials, including newly appointed Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, are driving homeless and low-income people out of the city's downtown areas.

The moves are part of a conscious policy of the corporate and financial elite, aimed at building up the downtown center as a haven for the wealthy, while shutting down large sections of the city. Billionaires, including Quicken Loans owner Dan Gilbert and Little Caesars owner Mike Illitch, have purchased large tracks of downtown land and buildings, seeking to cash in on this "revitalization."

On April 19, residents in the multiple apartment complex on Henry Street in the Cass Corridor section of Detroit, just north of downtown, were notified that they had to move out of the building by May 20. A large percentage of the residents are disabled and many have lived in the building for over 30 years.

The former owner of the buildings, Peter Mercier of Grosse Pointe Farms, sold it to an unknown buyer which has taken efforts to hide its identity. The purchaser has a confidentiality agreement like those in more than a dozen similar sales since 2008. Many residents believe Illitch is behind the decision and is planning to build a new stadium for the Red Wings hockey team in the area.

"It's not right," said Catherine Stevens, an elderly resident who is disabled. "They give us from now until May 20. We don't have any place to go. How are we going to find a place in such a short period of time?"

"We are hearing that Mike Illitch bought this joint. But nobody knows for sure who bought it. We heard he wants to tear it down to build a new stadium for the Red Wings. He has bought everything around Woodward, and he wants this too."

A maintenance man told the WSWs, "There are a lot

of people who stay in these buildings that are disabled and only get so much a month. We have to save up in order to move. He is not giving us enough time to do that."

"There are a lot of people who are elderly who have been here for 25-30 years. And you have someone who comes up and serves you papers, and you have to leave in a month? How can they do that?"

Residents received a letter from the former owner and an official document to vacate, one step before eviction. Mercier reportedly asked the new owner to extend the time the residents would be required to leave, but he was rebuffed.

The redevelopment plans for the area north of downtown received a boost last week when the Federal Transit Authority gave its final approval for the M-1 street rail car on nearby Woodward Avenue. Dan Gilbert is the co-chairman of the 3.3 mile project that will straddle the tenant buildings. Work is expected to begin this summer. The streetcar would also straddle the new Red Wings stadium, bringing together projects by both Illitch and Gilbert, who has a casino and 22 other buildings in the downtown area.

James Cohill, 82, has lived in the apartments for 13 years said, "It's a bad deal, I know that. Nobody here has any money. We are all on fixed income. We want some help and for them to compensate us so that we can leave and give us ample time to move."

"We can't be rushed out. Hell, I'm 82 years old."

Like many of the residents, Cohill is on disability and cannot afford higher rents. Presently, tenants pay \$225 for a basement apartment and \$350 for those on the main floor and above.

DeVon Crehshaw, a tenant for three years, complained that the old owners were also indifferent to the needs of the tenants, including complaints of health

hazards. Crenshaw, who has a music recording business and an apartment in the complex, said that he paid \$600 for rent last week, only a few days before he received the notice to vacate.

“I don’t understand how a corporation can do something like that and not give your money back,” he said.

Crenshaw said he had filed a complaint with the housing department because he found bed bugs in the building that affected him and his neighbor, who had a newborn child. “We caught 20-30 and placed them in a cup. I went to the hospital because I heard they can give you a virus. So, I wanted to get my blood tested and everything. They charged me \$900 for that, and I haven’t received anything for it.”

“A young lady stayed next to us with a newborn baby, and the baby kept being bitten by the bed bugs, and the EMS came and took the baby.”

Another tenant, Greg Hawkins, who has been living in the apartment building for two years, was incensed by the eviction. “It is my belief that we do not fit the image of the new midtown or downtown,” he said. “With Detroit being a multi-cultural entertainment destination, we are part of the culture they don’t want down here.”

In a related development, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) recently filed a lawsuit with the US Department of Justice charging the Detroit Police Department with picking up homeless people and dropping them outside the city boundaries.

The ACLU said they began an investigation in January 2012, after receiving numerous complaints. “DPD’s practice of essentially kidnapping homeless people and abandoning them miles away from the neighborhoods they know—with no means for a safe return—is inhumane, callous and illegal,” said Sarah Mehta, ACLU of Michigan staff attorney.

The ACLU release gives the example of a homeless man, Marvin, 37, who was handcuffed, placed in the back of a squad car and driven 14 miles away to Allen Park and told to “get out.” Another homeless man, Elvin D, 46, was sleeping in Hart Plaza around midnight when the police offered him a ride to a homeless shelter. Instead of taking him to a shelter, however, he was driven nearly 10 miles away to Dearborn. After the police dropped him off, Elvin spent most of the night walking back.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact