

Downtown Detroit tenants hold meeting to fight back against evictions

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On Saturday, more than 40 seniors living in low income housing in downtown Detroit met to discuss their pending eviction and to formulate a strategy to fight back against evictions occurring across the city.

The meeting was first addressed by Ted Phillips, executive director of United Community Housing Coalition, and then by D'Artagnan Collier, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Detroit mayor. Two representatives of the United Tenants Council of Councils were also present. During a lengthy discussion, the seniors expressed their outrage at being tossed out of their homes with no other place being prepared for them as well as their determination to fight for their right to decent housing.

The seniors, comprised of retired auto workers, city workers and others from around the city, gathered at the Griswold Apartments building in downtown Detroit. The meeting was held despite a "meeting canceled" notice placed on the advertisements for the meeting posted throughout the Griswold apartments, which was reportedly written on the orders of management.

However, when Collier and SEP campaigners arrived, tenants insisted the meeting be held, stressing that not only did they have a right to hold whatever meetings they chose to, but also that they collectively had decided to allow Collier to attend. Some tenants then led SEP campaigners through the building to knock on doors to inform residents to come despite what was written on the meeting announcements. Management did not interfere.

Evictions of people living in low-income housing are occurring across Detroit. The approximately 120 residents of the Griswold Apartments received eviction notices in May and will be forced out in March 2014. Henry Street tenants received notices in April and were given a month to leave and then a one-month extension.

Other tenants in downtown have not yet received official notices, but given the gentrification that is happening in the area, residents suspect it is only a matter of time.

In downtown, Cass Corridor and across Detroit, residents are being evicted as part of a plan by Quicken Loans founder Dan Gilbert, who works very closely with Sachse and Broader Construction, the company that bought the Griswold Apartments, and Red Wings owner Mike Ilitch to "revitalize" Detroit. Their plan, a component of the Detroit Works Project, consists of renovating the current apartment buildings in downtown and midtown, considered prime real estate, such that rents double or even triple in cost. Rents that are currently around \$700 a month are expected to jump by \$500. Selected suites will have a cost of \$3,000 or more. The current tenants, who rely primarily on Section 8 and HUD for housing, will be forced out.

Collier was invited to speak at the meeting by the president of the Griswold tenants' council after SEP supporters brought news of the evictions to an earlier meeting at the nearby Industrial Stevens apartment building, which also houses retirees under Section 8. As of this writing, Industrial Stevens residents have not received eviction notices.

Collier explained that "the Democrats and the trade unions both support emergency manager Kevin Orr and they are working with billionaires Dan Gilbert and Mike Ilitch to gentrify downtown Detroit. The elite have a plan to 'revitalize' Detroit, but it is being done at the expense of the of the working class."

Referring to Orr's plan for the city, Collier continued, "While jobs and essential services are being cut because there is 'no money,' the Downtown Development Authority has agreed to give Ilitch \$283 million to build a stadium for his hockey team in his

proposed entertainment district.

“This is not about white versus black, but rich versus poor. The capitalists made their fortune off of the working class, now they are discarding retirees and the disabled. Their plan, supported by both the Democrats and the Republicans, will create mainly low-income jobs for the next generation of workers who have no prospect for their future.”

Collier stated that the eviction was in violation of basic social rights. “Health care and housing are not just for the rich and upper-middle class. They are social rights that should be guaranteed for everyone. \$32 trillion is currently being kept in offshore accounts where it cannot be taxed. So we must reject the claim that there is ‘no money.’ If this money was put under the democratic control of the working class there would be more than enough resources to meet their needs for good jobs and high standards of living.”

He insisted that the only viable strategy for achieving these goals was an independent struggle by the working class. “The City Council and the Democratic party represent the interests of the ruling class. You must appeal to all sections of the working class, and especially the youth, all of whom face worsening conditions under capitalism. There must be a council of workers to run the city democratically in the interests of the working class.”

After Collier concluded, Griswold tenant Bill William asked, “Why vote socialist? Do you really have a chance to win?” Collier replied, “We’re not just asking for your vote, we are running to educate the working class about the issues facing them. How did we get to this point? There has been a 30-year assault on workers’ living standards. Kevyn Orr’s law firm implemented the bankruptcy of Chrysler in 2009. They oversaw the plan to cut auto workers wages in half with the help of the unions. Workers need to mount a political struggle independent of the trade unions and the Democratic Party to which they are tied. The working class should control society and rebuild Detroit in the interest of social need, not private profit.”

Mr. William responded, “Well, you have my vote!”—a comment which drew applause from the residents.

Vanessa, another resident facing eviction, added, “In this building we’re like a family. If you break up Griswold it’s like breaking up ‘The Griswolds.’

You’re breaking up a family. We see each other more than we see our natural family.” She continued, “In a society, we should all count, we all can live together. The rich people need workers, they can’t live without us. But we can’t afford the rich! They have got to go!”

“You know what else,” continued Vanessa, “it’s not about age or race or faith. It’s about doing what’s right. The rich are not right.”

Another resident said, “It’s like a paradox: at the same time as you have all these billionaires with so much money, the city itself is bankrupt. How is that possible?”

Collier replied, “There is plenty of money, it is a question of who controls the resources. Under capitalism the wealthy are in control of society and decide what the money is spent on. The working class has a long history of struggles, through which they have been able to win certain rights and entitlements from the rich. But these are being stripped away.”

Tenants also denounced the unions. One remarked, “Where is the UAW? AFSCME? Why haven’t they called a general strike? None of them are going to help us. We have to help ourselves.”

Other SEP campaigners spoke and emphasized that the entire working class—from youth, to auto workers, service workers, even white collar workers, as well as retirees, the disabled, and the unemployed—was under the same kind of attacks from the ruling elite.

The meeting concluded with a unanimous vote by the residents to form a group to draft an open letter addressed to all sections of the working class, appealing to them to fight against evictions as part of a broad defense of the social rights of all workers in Detroit.



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