

“I’m prepared to go to jail to have my rights”

Griswold tenants speak out on threatened eviction

A WSWWS reporting team
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Tenants facing eviction at the Griswold apartments near downtown Detroit spoke to the World Socialist Web Site following a meeting addressed by Socialist Equality Party Detroit mayoral candidate D’Artagnan Collier. (See “Downtown Detroit tenants hold meeting to fight back against evictions”.)

Deborah Miller was infuriated by the attempted cancellation of the tenants’ meeting by building management. She led SEP campaigners in an effort to round up residents who had been told of the cancellation, to let them know the meeting would proceed as planned. Ultimately the meeting was well attended. Miller spoke passionately about the need to fight for social rights.

“Dan Gilbert would never come here to talk to us,” Miller commented, referring to the Detroit billionaire who is buying up property in downtown Detroit. “We have got holes in the walls, we have got bed bugs. And yet he says ‘I love the seniors.’ Well, we want our city back. [Workers should] shut this city down! Get out in the streets, stop them from making money.”

Asked what she thought of the evictions and the emergency manager, Miller said, “It’s not fair. It is clear they are not looking out for us.” And the emergency manager? I thought this was stupid. They hand him all of this power just so that they can bring in people who are making more than \$100,000 a year.”

She continued, “You know, they [building management] tried to stop Mr. Collier from being able to speak here. We opposed this. I have to have him here if I want to hear what he has to say. We still have freedom of speech. They don’t have the right to tell us who can come here. They may own the building but we still have the right to hear who we want to hear.”

“I’m prepared to go to jail to have my rights. Mr. Collier is saying openly many of the same things that a lot of people say among themselves.”

Vanessa, another Griswold resident facing eviction, was very vocal during the meeting, stating at one point, “We cannot afford the rich,” and later “When are we going to stand up and fight for this? Nobody is going to give this to us. It’s time to fight!” She spoke to the WSWWS afterwards.

“My people came to Detroit from Georgia in 1953,” Vanessa said. “My grandfather worked in a steel foundry in Hamtramck. He believed in working hard, being honest and having good ethics; that is what we were raised to believe. That is why I am so opposed to what they are doing here. How is it ethical or fair to throw people out of their homes?”

“When I was growing up everyone in the neighborhood helped each other out. I grew up on the East Side of Detroit. I was young when the riots took place, around 14 years old, but I remember the events very well. While the rioting initially started as a result of a police shooting, they took such a violent character because people were really fed up with the conditions as a whole. The rich people are making things impossible for us. They do not want us to have anything, and I truly believe that just like 1967, things are going to blow up once again.”

Johnny Watts worked as a nurse’s attendant at a children’s hospital. He said, “I feel it’s very wrong to ask people to move out of a place that some of us have lived in for decades. It is greed, pure and simple. I was hoping that after moving here and being in what is a very good community of people, it would be the last place I would have to live for the rest of my life.”

“I moved to Detroit from Jamaica, New York back in the 1960s and bought a house. After retiring, I gave the house to my kids, and since then it has been sold. I love living in this building because everyone tries to help each other. We have good communication and some of us have common interests. Where else am I supposed to find that? The new owner says they are giving us plenty of time, but what about resources to move? What about a good place, too? What is being done to the people here is both mean and evil and I agree that something needs to be done about it. This needs to be fought out.”

Jamaica Watts said, “I think what they are doing (evicting seniors) is terrible. They want to remodel this building for somebody else. They have made it pretty clear that they don’t care about us. All they care about is the money. We have a lot of sick people in the building. A lot of ambulances come here. And because of this threat people are getting stressed out. It’s been hard on the residents already.”

Anthony Behn, 57 years old, said he agreed with what Collier said about the treatment of working people. Behn is a contract worker for Blue Cross Blue Shield insurance company, and he said it is very hard to live on his wage, with the cost of housing, food, and everyday expenses. “I have been working for Blue Cross Blue Shield for 39 years, and presently I’m making only \$12.05 an hour. I started off making \$3.17 an hour and I have never been able to make it to \$14 an hour.”

Cyrus worked over the years for all three car manufacturers, GM, Ford and Chrysler. He explained that he was fired from all three because he refused to accept the harsh conditions of the assembly line. He became a tool and die maker after going back to school, and then retired. He has lived at Griswold for over 10 years.

“Workers like me built this city,” said Cyrus. “We are the ones that built the cars, constructed the buildings and did all the work. Now the government and the rich people have no use for us. When they couldn’t make a lot of money at the factories, they shut them down. Now look at what’s happening here. When they feel they can get more money for rent, they want to throw us out of our residences. I feel that the entire government has to go. I like what Collier said about a council for the workers, this is what we need.”

Bill William has been living in the building for nine

years. Now retired, Mr. William has worked in several auto factories of Chrysler and GM; he was a machinist in Warren, Michigan. When laid off he worked as a waiter and busboy, among other low-wage positions. “Today’s meeting was productive”, he said. “We should be allowed to stay. Where’s the City Council?” WSWS reporters explained that because the Democratic Party dominates the City Council—a big business party—it represents the rich, whose social interests are in conflict with retirees and the working class as a whole.

Mr. William added, “During the energy crisis of the ’70s they (the rich and upper-middle-class) all left. Now they want to come back (to downtown) and kick us out.”



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