

Detroit seniors appeal for support to fight evictions

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8 July 2013

On Saturday, the Griswold Tenants' Community Council, consisting of officers and residents of the Griswold Apartments in downtown Detroit, held a meeting to discuss plans to fight their eviction by the building's new owners.

The meeting discussed and drafted an open letter to workers in the metropolitan Detroit area to rally support for their struggle against Mayor David Bing, unelected Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr and the city's business elite, which want to drive low income and elderly residents out in order to raise rents and build upscale housing and entertainment districts.

The open letter was widely discussed and passed unanimously. The letter calls for the immediate end of all evictions and gentrification plans by wealthy developers. In part, it reads, "[S]upport our fight against eviction as part of a broader opposition to the 'restructuring' of Detroit in the interests of the rich. High-quality housing is a social right that must be guaranteed to all."

The letter goes on to state that, "decisions that affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of working people in Detroit are being made behind our backs, beginning with the emergency manager. To advance our interests, workers must organize independently, setting up committees in factories and neighborhoods throughout the city. We cannot rely on any section of the political establishment, Democrat or Republican."

The 120 tenants at the Griswold Apartments—who are all low-income retirees or disabled people receiving "Section 8" rent subsidies—were given an eviction notice in May after their building was sold to Broader and Sachse, a "real estate services" company working closely with Quicken Loans CEO Dan Gilbert. Gilbert, whose net worth is about \$3.5 billion now owns or controls over 30 properties in and around downtown

Detroit.

Gilbert and other wealthy business owners like Little Caesar's CEO Mike Ilitch (worth about \$2.4 billion) are spearheading a project to gentrify a portion of the downtown and midtown areas to create an enclave for the rich and upper middle class. Using a network of subsidiary companies, they are working intimately with the city government through so-called "public-private" partnerships, which funnel public funds into private development projects, including a publicly subsidized arena for Ilitch's Red Wings hockey franchise just a few blocks away from the Griswold apartments. (See: "Detroit officials find \$286 million to subsidize new sports arena")

An officer of the tenants' council chaired the meeting. In attendance were tenants of the Griswold Apartments and representatives from the nearby Stevens apartments, who fear that they are next on the list for mass evictions. The residents also invited representatives from the Socialist Equality Party to attend and address the meeting. Several tenants spoke powerfully about the situation facing Detroit, and the urgent need to fight for social rights.

John lives in the Stevens apartments and is also a representative from the United Tenants Council of Councils (UTCC), a body of all Section 8 tenants councils in the city. He told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The way I look at it, this [letter] could be a beginning of a coalition of the UTCC and other high rise residents. What is best for those with limited resources? I can't buy an apartment. I have trouble affording my bicycle. My view is we need to make it clear that as old as we are, as infirm as we are, we still have fight in us and we are able to make our voices heard."

Griswold tenants' council president Recardo Barion

said, “I don’t want to put color in this at all, we are all poor. We should encompass everybody. I would like to have it put clearly in the letter that we understand that gentrification is about taking out people of one class and bringing in another class of people. It really should be illegal.”

Speaking of the new owners of the Griswold building, Broader and Sachse, Barion said, “Dan Gilbert owns this building, it doesn’t matter how many layers there are.”

Willie Griffin, the vice president of the Griswold council, pointed out the new owners had used the presence of asbestos and lead paint in the basement to get funding for renovations from the Detroit Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (DBRA). The authority is supposed to promote the revitalization of vacant lots, which are “contaminated, blighted, or functionally obsolete.”

Barion added, “They’re getting more than \$400,000 for Brownfield, to clear this area out because of contamination. The city is getting ready to give them money to redevelop the building for the rich, and all this time we been living under these conditions? Why didn’t they invest in the building while we were here? It’s still government money and if the government is giving money to the new developer, it’s obvious we should be getting it instead. We shouldn’t have to fight for exiting funds and vouchers [to relocate] when the renovation is being funded by the city’s funds. There are too many games being played.”

Speaking of the city government, another resident, Bill, said, “I hope they’ve got a ‘think tank,’ because if they keep doing this, pushing the masses, oppressing them, they will get a repeat of [the Detroit riots of] 1967. The people were so impoverished while a few people were making millions, it took just one incident and it went off like a powder keg.

“There is going to be a backlash and it isn’t going to be pretty. I see it coming. Maybe not this summer, or the summer after, but it’s going to happen. These people will rebel just like they’re doing in the Middle East now. It’s going to be the same thing right here in Detroit. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was the beginning of a nationwide explosion. I hope they’re thinking about that.”

Vanessa, a board member said, “Somehow we have to figure out how to get the power back to the people.

They think that because they have the money they can get away with anything.”



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