

Workers must support the Griswold residents' fight against eviction

Statement by D'Artagnan Collier, SEP candidate for mayor of Detroit

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As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for mayor of Detroit, I urge workers and young people throughout the Detroit Metro area to support the Griswold Apartment tenants who are fighting eviction and taking a stand against the "restructuring" of Detroit in the interests of the rich.

On July 6, residents of the Griswold Apartments issued an "Open Letter to All Detroit Area Citizens" calling on working people to support their fight. The majority of the 120 residents of the downtown apartment building are senior citizens on fixed incomes. After working their entire lives in the city's auto factories, public schools and other work locations, they have been given until March 2014 to pack up their belongings and vacate homes where they have lived, in some cases, for decades.

This outrageous and inhumane act is part of a wider plan to evict low-income residents from the downtown and midtown areas and clear the way for an upscale housing and entertainment district, including a new hockey stadium, which is largely being subsidized with public money.

This plan has been endorsed by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr. Orr is using the threat of bankruptcy to impose sweeping attacks on workers and essential social services. The aim is to pay off the big banks and wealthy investors who control the city's bonds and other forms of debt.

The Griswold tenants have made it clear they will not be pushed out like animals. They have appealed to the working class, writing, "What is happening to us is happening in different forms to every section of workers, seniors and youth throughout the city." Under

Orr, they write, "Wages and pensions will be slashed, jobs eliminated, city assets sold off" and "large sections of Detroit shut down, with a small section (7.2 square miles) turned into an enclave for the rich."

The residents declare, in a statement I wholeheartedly support, that, "It is time to fight back!" This is a sentiment shared by workers throughout Detroit, the US and around the world, from Greece, to Brazil, to Turkey and Egypt.

Five years after the collapse of Wall Street firm Lehman Brothers and the beginning of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the stock market has fully recovered, banking and other corporate executives are once again pocketing huge fortunes, and corporations, including the Detroit automakers, are making billions in profits.

But the corporate elite and their bought-and-paid-for politicians insist they will not give up a penny of their ill-gotten wealth to alleviate the miserable conditions they have created. Trillions went to Wall Street and to fund criminal wars, but workers, young people and retirees are told there is "no money" to fund pensions, health care, public education or anti-poverty programs.

Detroit is being used as a model for the "new normal" in America. Public schools, social services, parks, the Detroit Zoo and even the masterpieces of the Detroit Institute of Art are to be put up for sale to private investors and venture capitalists. In violation of the state constitution, the emergency manager is reneging on the pension and health care obligations owed to hundreds of thousands of retired city workers and their dependents.

As part of this process, the city is removing

“undesirables,” i.e., low-income people, from downtown and shutting down entire working class neighborhoods. They aim to create a city that caters to the needs of the super-rich, not those whose labor produces society’s wealth.

The open letter denounces the fact that “decisions that affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of working people in Detroit are being done behind our backs.” It declares: “To advance our interests, we must organize independently, setting up committees in factories and neighborhoods throughout the city” and insists, “We cannot rely on any section of the political establishment, Democrat or Republican.”

The letter concludes by calling for a mass conference of workers throughout the city and metropolitan area to “discuss a program to stop evictions and defend all the rights of the working class.”

The open letter is an important step, which indicates the growing political understanding that workers ourselves must take the initiative if we are to defend our social and democratic rights.

After nearly five years of the Obama administration, tens of millions have come to realize that the candidate of “change” has gone even further than his Republican predecessor in attacking workers, waging criminal wars and spying on the American people, as the courageous actions of former NSA contractor Edward Snowden have revealed.

As for the local Democratic Party politicians, including my opponents in the mayoral race, they have no answers to the devastating social crisis in Detroit because they defend the capitalist system and the immense levels of social inequality that it inherently creates. The Griswold residents have boldly placed their fate in the hands of the working class instead.

A turn to the working class does not mean an appeal to the United Auto Workers, AFSCME or any other unions. These organizations have long abandoned the interests of the workers they allegedly represent and have become junior partners in corporate exploitation, while blocking any attempt to break with the Democratic Party.

What do we mean by turning to the working class? In Detroit and the surrounding suburbs there are millions of auto workers, hospital workers, teachers, service workers, technology workers, high school and university students. All have a common interest, no

matter what their race or ethnicity, to break the grip of the banks and corporations and reorganize economic and political life on a more rational, democratic and egalitarian basis.

The workers who create society’s wealth have the greatest interest in making sure that wealth is used to lift the material and cultural level of all the people.

But this can only be achieved through a political struggle to unite every section of the working class and oppose all those, including the trade unions and pro-Democratic Party groups, that use race and identity politics to subordinate workers to the demands of the banks and big business.

In my election campaign I have called for the replacement of the City Council with a council of workers, a body that genuinely represents the interests of the overwhelming majority of the city’s population. Only when workers take political power in our own hands can we put the banks and corporations under the control of working people, redistribute the wealth, and pour billions into the hiring of the unemployed to rebuild the city of Detroit—not for the rich, but for working people.



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