

Detroit's Henry Street apartment evictions placed on hold

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After facing the threat of eviction for two months, residents of the Berwin Apartments on Henry Street, north of downtown Detroit, have been informed by the owner that the sale of the property had fallen through and that they could remain in their apartments. In a letter to tenants, owner Peter Mercier apologized for the “inconvenience” and said that payment for rent would begin again.

The threatened eviction of the low-income residents, many of whom lived in the building for as long as 30 years, provoked protests and outrage over a gentrification program that targets the poor. The buyers of the buildings were shielded by a vast web of holding companies designed to conceal their identity. However, the overwhelming sentiment among the apartment residents was that behind the deal stood Mike Ilitch, the billionaire owner of Little Caesar's Pizza who plans on building a new Red Wings hockey team stadium in the area.

The residents turned out to be correct. On June 18, George Jackson Jr., president and CEO of the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, a division of the Downtown Development Authority (DDA), revealed that the buyers were a “mix” of the city and Ilitch Holdings. Ilitch Holdings owns 48 properties in the district where the stadium is planned. Detroit's Mayor Dave Bing sits on the board of the DDA and would have had detailed knowledge of the deal.

Why was it shrouded in such secrecy? No one has answered this question. However, it is now clear that the Bing administration, working on behalf of billionaire developers, was seeking to conceal what was taking place.

The new stadium and entertainment district has been hailed by the media for its role in “reviving” Detroit. The project is being funded with the assistance of \$283 million in public funds. However, the district will be entirely under Ilitch's control.

Dan Gilbert, the billionaire owner of Quicken Loans, is

overseeing a similar project. He now owns over 30 buildings in downtown Detroit, including many historic structures designed by the famous architect Albert Kahn. Gilbert is co-chairman of the M-1 Rail project that, also with the assistance of public funds, will bring a measly three miles of light rail to the district around his holdings.

The WSWs spoke to several of the residents of the Henry Street apartments.

“We received a notice last week that the owners are not going to sell the building,” one tenant said. “Half of the people are gone,” he continued. “It's pretty outrageous.”

When asked why the landlord rescinded the decision to transfer ownership, some said it was because of the opposition that developed. Greg Hawkins, one of the spokesmen for the tenants said, “It was due to the bad publicity. People were made aware of what was happening. People spoke out against it, including your publication [the WSWs].”

Margaret Long said she was one of the tenants who moved. “When they gave the 30-day notice to move, I didn't stick around to find out what was going to happen. I prayed on it and decided it was time for me to go.”

Margaret did not believe anything was resolved by the new decision. “I believe it is going to resurface. Trust me, it is not going away. I believe it is going to resurface within the next year. They want all of these properties to rebuild on.

“One of the problems they face is that they did not do this properly.” Margaret added, “We are not stupid. We know what a real eviction is when we see one.”

Margaret said she was thankful that she had a generous fiancé to help her move. “It cost me \$1,700 to move. They want the first month's rent, deposits and a key deposit. Most of the people here can't do that.”

Henry Smith, a longtime resident, said his understanding was that the failure to sell the small garage-type building between the apartments was what caused

the sale to collapse. He said the building was not on the list of structures to transfer.

“I’ve been here for 17 years and I still want to know what the landlord is up to. First, we were given a notice to quit. Then they said we had an extra 60 days after we protested. And now they say we can stay and the rent is due. However, nothing is happening in this building. Things are getting bad. We can’t get our mail. The laundry room is sealed closed. After so many people moved out it is like a vacant building.

“Transients are moving in. And we still have a serious bed bug problem. The bed bugs in this building are the worst in this city. I kid you not. Several people got sick from the bed bug problem and the spraying.

“It’s getting worse, and I think they are trying to force us out. I will tell you one thing though, the bailiffs will have to come and get me, because I am not going out. I put my rent into escrow, and I will see what happens.”

Tye Huntley, a young worker in the music industry showed the WSWs the problems he had in his apartment. After several months the landlord fixed the severe water leak he had in his pipes that created a water bug infestation.

“Water bugs, cockroaches—they would come out of the pipes and the wall,” said Tye. “They just fixed the pipes, however the carpet is badly molded, and there are dead water bugs all over.

“This started in March. Water was pouring onto my bed. I only moved here in March, and I did not see the problem until after I moved in. By that time I had no place else to go. I didn’t use the kitchen because I was afraid roaches would get into my food. It’s really quite bad. It can affect your health.”

The contrast between the government providing hundreds of millions of dollars to fund the projects of the corporate elite, while low income and elderly residents are left in squalor, could not be starker.



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