

Tenants facing eviction attend SEP meeting on crisis in Detroit

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A July 15 meeting called by the Socialist Equality Party brought together youth, students, retirees and workers to discuss a socialist program for the revitalization of Detroit.

The meeting, held near Wayne State University, featured D'Artagnan Collier, SEP candidate for mayor of Detroit, as the main speaker. Attendees included a delegation of tenants from the Griswold Apartments near downtown Detroit who are facing eviction.

The 120 mostly elderly and retired residents are being forced out to make way for upscale real estate development, including a new hockey stadium. They were given eviction notices in May after their building was sold to a real estate firm working closely with Detroit billionaire Dan Gilbert, who owns and controls some 30 properties in and around downtown.

Collier opened his remarks by condemning the verdict in the case of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed black teenager shot to death in Florida by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer. In a travesty of justice, a jury acquitted Zimmerman of all charges.

At the same time, he declared, "The trial and the outcome have been presented solely as a racial issue." While racism likely played a role in Zimmerman's attack on Martin, he said, the focus on race by the media and pseudo left groups was aimed at concealing the fundamental cause of oppression—that is the capitalist system. The "bigger issues," Collier said, "are the attacks on democratic rights and the growth of inequality. No one addresses the deplorable social conditions in this country, where one in six people are on food stamps."

Collier said Detroit was the focal point of this crisis. "Behind the backs of working people, the Wall Street bankers and their unelected hatchet man, emergency manager Kevyn Orr, are conspiring to destroy pensions, city services and sell public assets.

"To get an idea of the kind of revitalization they are speaking of, look at the treatment of tenants in the Henry Street and Griswold Apartments. The agreement to expel low-income workers in both locations was approved by the

city government, the emergency manager and billionaires."

"How do we see the revitalization of Detroit?" asked Collier. "Socialism is the only way forward, the reorganization of all economic life under the democratic control of the working class, to meet social needs, not private profit."

The next speaker, 2012 US presidential candidate Jerry White, reviewed the history of the crisis in Detroit. "The plans to 'revitalize Detroit' are being drafted behind the backs of working people," he said. "They are being drawn up in the interests of a financial elite," he said.

White noted that Detroit workers—in mass struggles led by auto workers in the 1930s and afterwards—had fought to achieve what was at once the highest per capita income in the United States. By the 1980s, however, the ruling class ended its policy of class compromise and unleashed a class war aimed at making workers pay for the decline in the world position of American capitalism. Hand in hand with the rise of financialization of the US economy was the policy of deindustrialization. In Detroit, this meant the wholesale closure of auto plants abetted by the trade unions and successive Democratic Party administrations in the city, which had transformed Detroit into the poorest big city in America.

"As industry was shut down the American capitalist system was based more and more on debt. What happened in Detroit was far more criminal than what they did to the subprime mortgages. The city has been saddled with massive debt." White noted that \$246 million a year goes to pay the city's debt service to the banks.

White contrasted the policies adopted by the ruling elite in the 1930s depression to the present economic crisis, pointing to the actions of the Roosevelt administration, which responded to the spread of mass unemployment and the explosion of social struggles by instituting a public works program, the Works Progress Administration or WPA, which hired 100,000 workers in Detroit alone.

"Today," said White, "under conditions of mass unemployment, any suggestion that there should be a public

works program is laughed off by the corporate and political establishment.” Instead, the program of the Obama administration was to force young people to work for poverty wages.

In conclusion, White declared, the problem was not a lack of resources, but who controlled those resources, noting that a tax on the 13 richest billionaires in Detroit would more than solve the entire debt problem of the city.

After the opening reports a lively and far ranging discussion ensued. Among the issues raised by those in the audience was the question of public works, urban farming, the export of jobs to China and other low wage countries and the plans advanced by the emergency manager to privatize the city’s water department.

In response to the question of the export of jobs White explained that capitalism was a global system. “It is not our wealth or our money. We are not paid for what we produce.” Workers in the US, said White, had more in common with their brothers and sisters in China and Mexico than with the owners of the US banks and corporations.

Lawrence Porter, SEP assistant national secretary, said that proposals for urban farming were utopian and could not possibly provide the food, let alone the jobs, needed to sustain the population of Detroit. He noted that a section of environmentalists were endorsing urban gardening in alliance with organizations such as the Detroit Works Project that are seeking to shut down whole areas of the city, driving residents out by denying basic services.

Several Griswold tenants intervened in the discussion, expressing their determination to carry forward the fight against eviction.

Recardo, a member of the Griswold Tenants Community Council, said, “We are not just going quietly. We are not just going out. These people are ready to act. I am talking about shutting down Detroit. We have just a short time.”

Later in the discussion John, the vice president of the United Tenants Council of Councils (UTCC)—a body that brings together tenants councils throughout downtown apartments—proposed a march on the offices of the department of Housing and Urban Development.

In response Collier replied, “We say yes, workers must resort to the kind of tactics they carried out in the 1930s and 1960s, but it must be part of an overall struggle and strategy against capitalism, whose aim is not to try to pressure the ruling class for reforms but to take political power in our own hands. The working class must advance its own solution because capitalism has failed.”

Lawrence Porter said, “We would endorse shutting down Detroit. The fight for the maximum mobilization of the working class, he said, is only possible if you are prepared to fight the unions and break with Democratic Party. They

work together with the Republicans to carry out the same policy against the working people.

“Workers should be engaged in strikes, demonstrations and rallies. But that must be connected to the struggles facing working people throughout the area—city workers, auto workers, the unemployed—to come together to come together and recognize that an attack against one is an attack against all.”

Porter called on the meeting to endorse the open letter drafted by the Griswold tenants, with the assistance of the SEP, appealing to workers in the Detroit area to rally behind their struggles.

Speaking in support of the resolution, the president of the Wayne State University chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth and student movement of the SEP, expressed the support of the IYSSE for the Griswold tenants. She pledged that IYSSE members would broadly distribute the open letter in neighborhoods and workplaces.

The meeting then voted unanimously to endorse the open letter and fight for its distribution to workers in the Detroit area. After the meeting informal discussion continued.

Several of those attending spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Vanessa Hicks, a Griswold tenant, said, “My main concern is to bring humanity back to Detroit. Whatever happened to doing right? It has nothing to do with your color. We are letting the public know we are very much alive.

“D’Artagnan is the one who made me realize we have two parties claiming to be different, which are really the same. They all represent those with money.

“The SEP wants to do what is right. I think the IYSSE is giving young people a chance to open their eyes and see what is going on.”

Sharon, an unemployed nurse and a Griswold tenant, said, “I think corruption is totally rampant in Detroit. A lot of the City Council has their fingers in the money pot. Who is Kevyn Orr in bed with? Detroit is up for sale. We have a wonderful art collection a few individuals would love to get their hands on. This is what is scaring me.”



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