Downtown Detroit tenants facing eviction support demonstration to save the DIA

Betty Hayes
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Downtown Detroit residents who are being forced out of apartments due to gentrification have announced that they will send a delegation to the demonstration on Friday to defend the Detroit Institute of Arts. (See defendthedia.org)

Dee Davis, the president of the United Tenants Council of Councils, representing tenants and tenant councils from the Griswold, Industrial, Steven's and Washington buildings in downtown Detroit, will address the rally.

There are approximately 2,000 low-income residents and seniors who live in the downtown Detroit area. Because the area is now being gentrified as part of the "restructuring" of Detroit under Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, the apartments that low-income residents now occupy are considered prime real estate. Developers project rents doubling or even tripling in the near future.

Current tenants, who rely primarily on Section 8 and HUD (Housing and Urban Development) for housing assistance, are being systemically forced out. Tenants at the Griswold building were the first to receive notices that their building had been sold to a new owner, and that they would not be eligible for Section 8 housing. They have until March 2014 to move out of their homes.

Davis has endorsed the demonstration and is opposed to selling the art at the DIA. She spoke to the WSWS about the relationship between the attacks against Detroit's cultural institutions and what is being done to seniors who live in the downtown area. She explained that the situation facing area residents downtown was very bleak.

"The attack on art and the attack on seniors are of one piece," Davis told the WSWS. "They are destroying what are important things not just for seniors or young people, but for everyone in this city. What comes next? Will they then close other museums like the African American museum? These institutions give life to the city. There is a rich history there. You get a vision of life from both the present and the past. It opens up our minds and provides very fertile information. When you walk through the different galleries, you see the world as it was, put on canvases by the great masters at different historical periods. This art belongs to us."

She added, "Those of us living in the downtown area are facing a very bleak situation. They are gentrifying downtown and pushing the seniors out. We are in serious, serious trouble. What has been done to the tenants at Griswold is criminal. They will not receive a voucher to move until the end of the year and even that comes with stipulations. If you have a criminal record, were ever written up or got behind in rent, there is a chance you will not receive one. They then have until March of 2014 and this is in the dead of winter. We are talking about people who are 70 and 80 years old.

"This is being done under conditions where there is no affordable housing. There are no resources being made available to people. They are not telling us anything except one lie after another. A number of years ago Buzz Silverman, who is the owner of some of the buildings, told us not to worry about our homes and that plans were being made to do major renovations. This was all a lie!"

Dee Davis added that the tenants were also preparing a protest. "We will be holding a demonstration ourselves on Saturday, October 5, to take a stand. We are asking for more affordable housing downtown, better quality Section 8 buildings, and more responsive management. We are seeking to have a new awakening by organizing people and taking up a fight like we have had to do historically. We are not just going to lay

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down and accept things as they are.”

Debra Miller, a resident of the Griswold building, is actively organizing delegates from her building to attend the DIA demonstration. Debra proudly showed the WSWS her apartment at Griswold, creatively decorated by a number of her own pieces from arts and crafts classes taken in the building.

She said, “They want to take everything from us. They are running all the low-income people out of downtown. What does gentrification mean? You replace one class of people with another class. They continuously talk about the rebirth of Detroit, but it is a rebirth that doesn’t include people like myself. It is like a tale of two cities.

“They are not doing this democratically either. Right now we are under the thumb of an emergency manager, a dictator. We have to organize.”

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