

# Downtown Detroit tenants rally to demand decent and affordable housing

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On Saturday scores of representatives from tenant councils in buildings throughout the downtown Detroit area held a march and rally to oppose the attacks on decent and affordable housing for veterans, seniors and the disabled. Many who attended were in walkers and wheelchairs.

Tenants came from the Sheridan, Griswold, Cadillac, Parkview Towers, Stevenson, Casgrain Orchestra, Industrial, Detroit City and Cambridge buildings in the surrounding areas.

The rally was organized by the United Tenant Council of Councils and its chants included “Don’t agonize, organize,” “1,2,3, affordable housing for you and me” and “Seniors want affordable housing, when do we want it? Now!”

Those who attended are both angered and opposed to what is being done to residents of the Griswold building and see it as a warning of what will be done throughout the area. After new owners purchased the apartment building in March, the existing tenants were told that federal Section 8 housing would no longer be available and they had a year’s time to move.

The WSWs spoke with Deborah Davis, a 16-year resident at Griswold, and Doreen Randall, who has lived there for nine years.

“When I first moved here 16 years ago it was a very nice building, but things have deteriorated. This is what happens if you don’t replace the carpet and repair things. It is all about money. The owners collect our rent and get paid by HUD but they do nothing for the people who live here. After making lots of money they then sell the building and don’t even tell us.”

Doreen added, “They are still renting out apartments to people even though they will have to move in a few months’ time. All they want is money and they have no concern about our needs. We are treated like cattle.”

Events at Griswold bring into sharp relief the impact of the “restructuring” of Detroit taking place under Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, which is being carried out at the expense of those who have lived there for years. Seniors, disabled and veterans are being forced out of downtown while federal and state funds are being poured into the gentrification of the area, led by billionaires like Dan Gilbert and Chris Ilitch.

Those attending the rally also opposed the deplorable housing conditions they are forced to endure in Section 8 buildings subsidized by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Low-income tenants in the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program pay 30 to 40 percent of their monthly income for rent and the rest of the rent is paid to the landlord through a voucher.

Sandra, Daisy and Rosie, who live at Parkview Towers, described what life was like at their building.

“After new owners purchased the building, they started mistreating the seniors. One good friend of ours decomposed in her building because they didn’t want to have a check-in system that had existed in the building for years.

“They took our community room and television and then turned it into their offices. We called HUD and nothing was done. They are now telling us what time we have to be at home in the evening. It is like living in a dictatorship.”

Aubrey Wright, age 75, said he had come to support the Griswold tenants. “It is obviously an injustice. When you are on the lower level it is difficult. Those above take advantage by stepping on you. It is difficult because money is involved, because others can be bought. My wife and I marched with Martin Luther King. We understand that it is difficult.”

Arletha has cerebral palsy and is living on disability. She said, “I feel what is being done is unfair. It is not

right. Where are you going to go? I have been on disability all of my life and under Section 8 ever since I was on my own.

“So far it hasn’t affected the building I am in, but it is scary. How do you afford someplace to live?”

Anthony Smith said he lived downtown on First Street. “They don’t need to be evicted. They need to be in a home, a house, just like I am. I have lived downtown for six years. I have been on disability for 20 years. I am lucky that I am just one person and don’t have to spend money on anyone else.”

Gloria Richards said she had come to support the tenants due to her own experience with an unscrupulous landlord. “I am not a senior but I am here to support because I have my own issues. When I moved in to my apartment it didn’t have electricity. They sent an electrician, but they didn’t pay him, so he left the wires hanging out.

“When I flushed the toilet the water went on the floor. There was no furnace and a defective water heater. The window fell on my head the first day. When I complained to the landlord they shut off the lights and water. Then I called the police, but they didn’t want to hear about it. Then the landlord took the electric meter to stop me from complaining.

“I have been living there for a month. I sent all my pictures to Channel 2 News. DTE told me to work it out with my landlord. How can these people get away with this? I had no idea this could happen in 2013.”

The rally was also supported by a section of younger workers who marched with the seniors. Carlos told the WSWs, “I live across the street from the Griswold tenants and am here today at their rally to oppose what is happening to the seniors in the building.

“It is wrong that they are being displaced and pushed away from their families after living in the building for decades. Also, they are being asked to move in the middle of March, the dead of winter. As one of the citizens of the Capitol Park neighborhood, I see that something similar can happen with my building.

“As a number of seniors have said, why does the rebirth of the city have to be done at the expense of the people who live here? Everyone in Detroit wants to see the city improve, but not at our expense. The new forces that have invaded downtown claim that Capitol Park, where we started today’s rally, is generally vacant, but that is a lie. There are seniors, artists,

walkers, and skaters, all from the local area that go there everyday. It is and should remain a place for everyone.”

While the demonstration clearly expressed the desire of tenants and young people to fight these conditions, the perspective advanced at the concluding rally was to channel this anger behind Democratic Party politicians. Wayne County Commissioner Jewel Ware, State Representative Rashida Tlaib and Raquel Castanada-Lopez, who is running for City Council in the 6th District, addressed the rally. While feigning support for their struggle, they all proposed that tenants continue putting pressure on congress to defend their right to housing.

Because of budget cuts under the Obama administration, states and localities have lost \$2.5 billion in cumulative funding for the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and \$1.9 billion in cumulative funding for the HOME Investment Partnership program, the two large housing assistance and community development block grant programs. These and other cuts contribute to further losses of public housing and impede the development of affordable housing for seniors and people with disabilities.

Representatives from the WSWs urged seniors at the rally to turn to the independent strength of the working class to defend their social right to decent and affordable housing.



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