

Firm evicting elderly and disabled from downtown Detroit awarded tax abatement

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15 November 2013

At a brief hearing on Thursday, the Detroit City Council approved a tax abatement for the firm that is evicting over 100 low-income, elderly and disabled tenants from their Section 8 rent-subsidized apartments in downtown Detroit. In May of this year all the tenants of 1214 Griswold were given eviction notices when their building was purchased by a firm called 1214 Griswold LLC that was created specifically to buy the one building. The firm will now be awarded a Commercial Rehabilitation Exemption Certificate, allowing it not to pay taxes for up to ten years.

The evictions, as well as the sweetheart deals for real estate developers, are part of a drive to remove low-income residents from the downtown area. The Griswold building is right around the corner from the headquarters of Gilbert-owned Quicken Loans, which is the largest employer in downtown Detroit. It is also just a few blocks from the future location of the recently approved entertainment district centered on a new Red Wings hockey arena, to be owned and operated by billionaire Mike Ilitch for a period of at least 60 years. The Griswold building is to be transformed into higher-rent housing and commercial space.

After facing resistance, including an open letter written by the tenants addressed to the working people of Detroit to defend them against eviction as well as a recent downtown demonstration, 1214 Griswold LLC was forced to offer token concessions to the tenants. These include the paltry sum of \$157,000 (or about \$1,300 per tenant) to be used for moving expenses. The funds are to be disbursed by the Neighborhood Service Organization, a private non-profit with ties to the corporate establishment.

Additionally, a handful of tenants may be allowed to remain in the building for another full year as part of a

deal offered by the company. 1214 Griswold LLC originally offered to let five of the oldest and most infirm tenants stay in the building for another year. During the hearing, Democratic Detroit City Council member JoAnn Watson demagogically denounced “gentrification.” However, instead of demanding a halt to the evictions, she merely proposed that 10, rather than five, out of 117 tenants be allowed to stay, saying such an offer “would be a wonderful good faith effort on behalf of a population who has an emotional tie to the property in a way that is almost analogous to a faith commitment.”

After the hearing, Dee Davis, president of the United Tenants Council of Councils (UTCC), the body elected by the tenants of Section 8 subsidized housing in Detroit, said she considers Griswold to be “a pilot building.” There are four other Section 8 buildings in the same area, including the Washington building where Davis lives. “The same thing is going to happen to these other buildings,” she said.

The WSWs also spoke with Debra Miller, a retiree who resides at 1214 Griswold. Miller spoke about the conditions facing the residents as a result of construction projects that are already being implemented by the management. Miller charged the management with failing to provide a safe and clean environment despite receiving money from the Detroit housing authority intended for that purpose.

“It looks like we’re going to have five or ten tenants staying, and the rest will be forced out. It’s pathetic.” Miller said.

“The law requires them to provide a clean, safe environment, which they have not. The housing authorities are allowing these people to violate our rights. They are already remodeling the building, with us living in there, and we are suffering the effects from

it. I can't sleep at night. They've got work crews on the side of the building illegally. They are knocking big chunks of concrete down. I told them to get down and get out, and they left, which proves they knew they were violating the law.

"We had a big fire in here last year. We had to fight to get them to patch it up, even though the sixth floor looked like an abandoned building. But we kept paying our rent. Then they want to throw us out, even when we've been paying our rent all along," Miller said.

"Get rid of the owners and the managers, and all of the money could go directly into the buildings," she continued. "We need to teach all these owners a lesson, we need to take it back. You're not worthy to run this building!"

"I want to know where that money is going. And now they're saying they we can't have a Thanksgiving dinner. This money is going to someone, but I'm not sure who. They're all taking a piece of the action, and none trickles down to us," Miller added.

That a tax abatement for renovating the Griswold building is being given not to improve the living conditions of the people living there, but rather to develop a billionaire-owned commercial district and business campus, speaks volumes about the priorities of the social forces that are running the city. The attack on the right to safe and affordable housing is of a piece with the wholesale attack on pensions, culture and city services being carried out through the ongoing bankruptcy proceedings initiated by Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr at the bidding of state officials.

Thursday's hearing demonstrated the total complicity of the city council in this process and marked a further step in the looting of the city by the ruling elite.



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