

Students, retirees campaign for workers' inquiry into Detroit bankruptcy

A WSWS reporting team
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A team mobilized by the campaign for the Workers Inquiry into the Attack on the DIA (Detroit Institute of Arts) and the Bankruptcy of Detroit spoke to people who attended the annual Tree Lighting ceremony at Campus Martius Park in downtown Detroit last Friday. Several hundred onlookers, mostly working class families and young people from Detroit and the surrounding suburbs, attended the event, which was sponsored by Dan Gilbert, the billionaire owner of Quicken Loans, and held in front of his corporate headquarters.

The campaign team included students from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Wayne State University and residents of the Griswold Apartments and Tenants Association who are facing eviction from their homes. The IYSSE, the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, and tenants distributed leaflets exposing the collusion between the city's Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr and real estate tycoons like Gilbert and his fellow billionaire Mike Ilitch, who want to create an upscale housing, commercial and entertainment district in the downtown and midtown areas free of "undesirable" residents.

The shadowy real estate firm "1214 Griswold LLC" purchased the building, and has received a tax abatement from the city to pursue the removal of the largely retired, disabled and poor residents who live there. The more than 100 tenants at the building, who include retired auto workers, teachers and others, have waged a determined fight against the evictions including issuing an open letter to the workers of Detroit. This has prompted the new owners to make the derisory offer to allow five or ten residents to remain in their apartments, chiefly so the company can qualify for the tax cuts.

The Christmas tree lighting will be followed next Thursday by the annual televised parade, dubbed "America's" Thanksgiving Day Parade. While such events are common and even welcomed during the holidays, this year there is a special aura of unreality to the proceedings.

These events are being used to promote the idea of a "renewed" Detroit, when in reality, the corporate restructuring of the city is being carried out at the expense of the majority of the city's residents, who live under conditions of chronic poverty, in neighborhoods that have been largely decimated and deprived of basic services.

Gilbert has been on a buying spree, grabbing up property for pennies per square foot, and now owns more than 40 buildings in the downtown area. He is co-chairman of the M-1 Rail project that will transport people to the businesses he controls, including the Greektown Casino and Hotel. Recently, city officials and the Obama administration placed him in control of the demolition of 80,000 houses in Detroit giving him access to more cheap real estate in prime areas.

While claiming there is no money to provide city worker pensions and threatening to selloff the masterpieces of the DIA to satisfy the city's big creditors, more than a quarter of a billion dollars in public funds is being handed over to subsidize the building of a new sports stadium for Ilitch's Red Wings professional hockey franchise.

These measures have the complete support of the political and corporate establishment, from the Republican Governor Rick Snyder and Democrats like the newly elected mayor Mike Duggan and the Obama administration.

Workers attending the tree lighting ceremony had a lot to say about the bankruptcy proceedings:

Dwayne Cureton, a 23-year-old, who works odd jobs and hopes to return to college, where he played basketball, commented, “The situation in this city hurts me. I lived here my whole life. I’m not that old so I don’t really remember the golden days of Detroit, but I do remember when it wasn’t as bad as all this. I remember that it wasn’t so hard to get a job.

“The threat to pensions is insulting. My whole family worked in this city, and some of them were and are city workers. My uncle worked at Ford and my brother at Detroit Axle. I remember the buyouts in the auto industry. I thought that was terrible. They were telling my uncle after he worked for 40 years, you can’t have a pension ... and now they’re saying the same thing to city workers. It makes me mad.”

Dwayne spoke about the threatened sale of the DIA’s collection. “I think selling the artwork at the DIA makes no sense. It is so important for so many people. I remember going there as a kid on field trips. I remember seeing the Rivera mural. I thought it was the coolest thing ever. If they take the museum they will be yanking the spirit out of the city.”

Lauren Buzz who works at a downtown office commented, “I have been working in Detroit, although I don’t live in the city. I don’t agree with what they are doing to the pensioners. This is all against the workers. It’s outrageous what they are doing.”

An Eastpointe teacher remarked, “I work two jobs and I can’t make it. It is terrible what is happening to teachers and working people. In my district they cut our salary four-and-a half percent over the past three years. The cuts were imposed retroactively. How are you supposed to survive, when it’s hard enough as it is?

Addressing the issues in Detroit, the teacher added, “It used to be you received a pension. This doesn’t exist anymore. And with wages the way they are, how are you supposed to save for retirement? It’s impossible.”

Derrick Jackson is a city worker. “You have heard of eminent domain? That’s what is happening here. Dan Gilbert is taking over downtown, and buying up property for peanuts. They see a downtown without poor people.

“They have a blueprint for helping business. You look around, and it looks good, but it’s at the expense of the poor. Mayor Dave Bing was bought off. He came in and dismantled the bus system. If you notice, there

isn’t a place to stand or sit downtown. There were seats during the Pro-Bowl when it was held in Detroit, but they took them out because they didn’t want poor people sitting in the chairs.”

“This is not a black or white thing. But you take Snyder, Orr, Bing and Duggan: they are like wolves in sheep’s clothing. People don’t see it now, but Duggan will push for the people who are the more fortunate.”



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