

Tenants Council welcomes Lawrence Porter

Detroit meeting builds delegation for February 15 Workers Inquiry

WSWS reporters
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Dee Davis, president of the United Tenant Council of Councils (UTCC) opened a meeting last Friday with a warm welcome to Lawrence Porter, the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party, who was invited to speak about the February 15 Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions.

Porter addressed an audience of some 25 tenants of the Griswold, Washington Boulevard and Industrial-Stevens buildings in downtown Detroit.

Tenants from the Griswold building, many of whom are elderly and disabled, are being evicted from their apartments on March 31 as part of an agreement reached a year ago with 1214 Griswold LLC, the company established for the explicit purpose of purchasing this building.

Representatives from the federally controlled Housing and Urban Development authority (HUD) told the tenants at a meeting in late January that the deadline was final. As part of the gentrification of downtown Detroit, low-income residents are being driven out of low-income Section 8 housing to make way for the development of “market rate” upscale apartment units.

Many of the tenants attending Friday’s meeting expressed their determination to fight back. Last July, the Griswold Tenant Council issued an open letter to all Detroit citizens opposing “the ‘restructuring’ of Detroit in the interests of the rich.” It declared, “High quality housing is a social right.”

The invitation was extended to the SEP for the tenants to learn more about the February 15 Inquiry and get more information on how to mobilize workers to fight for their rights.

Porter began by explaining that the bankruptcy filing

and the decisions of the emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, were primarily *political* decisions that were “part of a conspiracy by a ruling elite that wants to roll back the clock 100 years.”

Porter noted that at that very moment President Obama was in Lansing, Michigan, signing the Farm Bill into law, wiping out \$8.7 billion in food stamps affecting 1.7 million people nationwide. He showed figures reporting the growth of a national “food emergency” from the US Conference of Mayors, and the increase in poverty to one in six Americans, explaining that one of the reasons the SEP is holding the Workers Inquiry is because government policy has “targeted seniors.”

Porter reviewed how Michigan’s Public Act 436 was autocratically signed into law by Governor Snyder within weeks of a nearly identical proposal (PA 4) being overwhelmingly defeated by Michigan voters.

Much of Porter’s presentation detailed the conspiracy between former Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, and the Jones Day law firm, supported by the Obama administration. He noted that the intrigues go back over two years, when Jones Day drafted a report indicating that Chapter 9 bankruptcy could be used for the specific purpose of ripping up municipal pensions.

Porter also discussed the secret emails between Bing and Snyder administration officials, in which the mayor pledged his support for the installation of an unelected dictator to take over the affairs of the city government. “It’s not an accident they chose an African American in a majority African American city,” Porter said. “Orr, like Obama, speaks for the rich, not working people. Remember, it is not the color of your skin, it is the class

you're in. This is another way the ruling elite maintains their control."

Focusing on "who benefits" from the bankruptcy and the cry that "there is no money," Porter pointed out that billionaire Mike Ilitch is receiving \$280 million in "public welfare" to build the new Red Wings hockey stadium, and Quicken Loans magnate and real estate mogul Dan Gilbert is "buying up Skyscraper Row for a song."

The mention of Gilbert brought a noticeable response from the audience who suspect that he is behind the purchase of the Griswold apartments, which is located across the street from Capitol Park and is just around the corner from Gilbert's Quicken Loans headquarters on Woodward Avenue. The new owners will be exempt from property taxes for the next ten years.

In the course of a lively discussion following Porter's presentation, Willie Griffin, vice president of the Griswold tenants' committee declared, "I'm ready for a worldwide strike. I need to know when we, the people, can shut down Detroit [in a general strike] and move it to Washington!"

Porter responded by explaining the reactionary role of the trade unions as collaborators in the conspiracy surrounding the bankruptcy. He said, "The unions have been very silent. They had a lawsuit with the banks for 'maximum monetization' of the artwork at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), saying it would be used for pensions. The unions were never interested in fighting for jobs or against the bankruptcy. They are in it for themselves and are looking for a half-billion dollar VEBA (Voluntary Employees Beneficiary Association or retiree health care trust fund) like in the auto industry." This is all part of 'the grand bargain' called for by the bankruptcy courts that will require the unions to accept massive cuts to pensions, with the city paying as little as 25 cents for every dollar it owes to the pension funds."

Discussion and debate followed. One participant challenged Porter: "What is it you hope to accomplish? Are you hoping to reverse it [the bankruptcy]? If we march on Washington what can you hope to change? What is it you can do?"

Another asked, "Do you want to abolish the law cutting pensions?" A former auto-worker said, "I agree it's a conspiracy. We understand Orr is a puppet, but Congress is run by the Republicans, passing laws

against the middle class and workers."

Porter reiterated that the policy of the Socialist Equality Party is that "the working class has to organize itself independently of both big business parties to fight the economic and political domination of the rich."

A fundamental, revolutionary transformation of society was needed, he said. "Pensions must be a social right; health care should be a right. Since 2008, 95 percent of all wealth has gone to the top one percent. How can you have democracy under those conditions? It's a plutocracy—how did they get this kind of money except through impoverishing millions?"

"It's not that there's no money," he continued. "The money is controlled by the wealthy. It's not just Republicans. Obama got more money from Wall Street than the Republicans. Obama has boasted that he has cut more social programs than Bush, and it was Clinton who carried out massive cuts in welfare."

Dee Davis, responding to the discussion, said, "It confuses me when someone asks 'what do you propose?' It starts right here. We (the UTCC) don't take any political stand, but the truth is the truth. We need enough people to mobilize. There's enough blame to go around. Most of us agree we're being crapped on. We're the people—the majority. Ask 'What can I do to change things?'"

Informal discussion continued after the meeting, with a number of the tenants registering to attend the Workers Inquiry on February 15. The UTCC is sending an official delegation.



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