Detroit News feigns sympathy for Griswold tenants as evictions loom

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After months of remaining silent on the plight of the Griswold and other residents being evicted from downtown, the Detroit News published a front page feature on February 20 entitled, “Downside of upswing: Downtown Detroit squeeze forces out longtime tenants.”

In its article, the *Detroit News*, which has fully backed the attack on city worker pensions and the emergency manager’s plan to hand over the city to billionaire real estate developers, feigned sympathy for the more than 120, mostly elderly, Griswold residents who have been given a March 31 deadline to move out. The article presents the tenants and young people being evicted from a neighboring building as unfortunate victims of a process that is bringing the downtown area and city back to life.

The appearance of the article is significant. Those who are positioned to rake in massive profits from the “revitalization” of Detroit are increasingly worried that the resistance of the Griswold tenants, which has been publicized and championed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, is garnering support and exposing the real character of the “downtown development” scheme. The article interviewed a number of tenants who participated in the February 15 Workers Inquiry into the bankruptcy of Detroit, held by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Equality (IYSSE).

The evictions are not tangential but express the essence of the corporate-driven revitalization plan. The elderly, disabled, and a layer of young tech workers are being tossed out to make way for the plans to build upscale housing with rents at "market rates." Meanwhile, Quicken Loans CEO Dan Gilbert and his fellow billionaire Mike Ilitch are expected to make a fortune.

The seniors *News* reports, “Across the park from the 20 mostly young residents of 1215 Griswold were given 30 days to vacate their lofts. They have to leave by March 1. Most are paying $500 a month in rent for 2,300-square-foot spaces in a building with no working elevator and some boarded-up windows. Last year, an associate of Gilbert purchased the building. Earlier this year, the city found numerous violations that made it too dangerous for occupancy and ordered it be vacated immediately. The residents are being given $2,000 for the move and if necessary, a discounted rate at the Greektown Hotel for up to 30 days at the end of the month.”

It is apparent that these young artists are also considered the wrong tenants for the new Capitol Park “arts district.”

The area of downtown Detroit is being restructured in the interest of a small financial plutocracy who will control the businesses, stadiums and rental properties. This includes Ilitch’s 45-block entertainment district, which will include a new stadium for his Detroit Red Wings hockey team thrown in. Ilitch purchased the land worth millions for a single dollar, and over half of the construction costs of the stadium, some $285 million, will be funded with public money through the state government’s Michigan Strategic Fund.

The proposed $140 million M1 Rail project—which is only three miles long and will chiefly serve businesses owned by Gilbert—will be largely funded with federal money. Gilbert—who is also in charge of “blight removal”—has already acquired at least 40 downtown properties at rock bottom prices as part of his proposed “Woodward Corridor Place-making and Retail Strategy,” which the rail line will service.

The *News* falsely reported that the new owners are compensating the tenants they are evicting and quotes

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Gilbert saying they are being treated in a "humanitarian way." In fact, they are being tossed out like animals. Dangerous construction has resumed in the building after tenants' legal action halted it and the City Council, the federal Housing and Urban Development agency and other forces have ganged up to drive them out.

In November, the Democratic Party-controlled City Council approved a 10-year tax abatement for the new owners of the Griswold Apartment based on the claim that they were maintaining low income housing units in their building by allowing 10 of the 120 residents to remain. Even this supposed sop to the tenants fell apart when HUD announced it would not provide an "enhanced" government-paid voucher to cover the sharp rise in rent to $1,123 a month and every one would have to vacate by March 31.

In a statement to the City Council, the new owners declared, "the cost of renovation can only be supported by the achievement of market rents, and any other scenario could jeopardize the entire development."

The Griswold tenants protested to the City Council at two separate meetings but to no avail. The City Council is fully behind the revitalization plan, voting earlier this month to hand over 39 parcels of land for Ilitch's state-subsidized retail and entertainment district.

The Griswold residents have shown courage and determination in the face of these attacks. Last July they issued an open letter to the workers of Detroit calling for an end of all evictions and gentrification plans by wealthy developers. The fight against the evictions, they said, "was part of a broader opposition to the 'restructuring' of Detroit in the interests of the rich. High-quality housing is a social right that must be guaranteed to all."

The letter continued, "decisions that affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of working people in Detroit are being made behind our backs, beginning with the emergency manager. To advance our interests, workers must organize independently, setting up committees in factories and neighborhoods throughout the city. We cannot rely on any section of the political establishment, Democrat or Republican."

Willie Griffin, vice president of the Griswold Tenant Council who testified at the Workers Inquiry on February 15, told the WSWS, "They are all in cahoots with each other, the City Council, HUD and the new owners. We are like pawns on their chessboard.

"We have been fighting for our rights for over a year. The new owners have been plowing away with construction and violating the rights of the seniors. They are creating conditions where people want to move. We need respect. Instead of making the transition for people easier, they are making it very difficult."

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers and young people throughout the Detroit Metro area to defend the Griswold Apartment tenants from eviction as part of the fight to mobilize the working class against the savage attacks on pensions and other social rights contained in the emergency manager's recently released "plan of adjustment."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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