

Some Detroit-area residents left homeless after eviction from condemned low-income motel

Debra Watson
27 October 2017

Some of the over 300 Detroit-area residents, most with severe housing needs, who were abruptly thrown out of the Royal Inn Motel in Oakland County, Michigan were still without housing weeks later. The motel is located on the north side of Eight Mile Road adjacent to the Detroit city limits.

The motel had been cited repeatedly by fire and health officials in Royal Oak Township for various health and safety violations. The Royal Inn had been condemned once before, in 2014. Among the complaints filed with the county health department were bed bugs and black mold. Human waste, insects and vomit in the hallways were also cited. There were fire violations related to smoking inside the rooms.

Residents at the condemned motel, many low-income regular renters, were plagued by deplorable living conditions, but lacked alternative affordable and decent housing options. At one point there were over 500 people living at the motel. However, before the final evacuation in mid-September, over a hundred residents had left. Those who were able, moved out when rumors indicated that fire and city officials were about to shutter the building.

When township officials finally tacked a notice on the door denoting the motel as “condemned unfit for humans,” the landlord threatened to call police to remove the 200 or so residents who still had not found alternative housing.

Aging motels across the US have become a de facto low-income safety net in urban areas as Section 8 low-income housing is woefully underfunded and utterly inadequate for the high numbers of poor looking for a place to rent. Lack of even minimal cash savings and other barriers prove prohibitive for many families seeking secure housing. Traditional landlords who rent apartment and single-family homes require security deposits of several hundred dollars. Landlords reject prospective tenants even if they have the money if their check stubs only show part-time and variable work hours. A previous eviction or poor credit rating can

condemn a renter to homelessness.

Local housing groups struggled to help the Royal Inn Motel residents find other accommodations, but all these agencies are strapped and unable to meet the needs of tens of thousands who live in horrible and unsafe housing arrangements in Detroit and its inner-ring suburbs.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke to some former residents of the Royal Inn who were temporarily camped outside under the eaves of the boarded up motel. We found seven people there, living out of shopping carts and sleeping rough, waiting for first-of-the-month checks to start the process of apartment hunting. Although the owner has vowed to fix the laundry list of housing and fire code violations, more than a month later the facility is still boarded up.

Debby Sharp, a former Royal Inn resident, told our reporter, “I am here at the Royal Inn, homeless. We were told we had to be out within 48 hours, so, on September 10, which was my birthday; everybody was out of the building. A lot of them were able to find homes to stay, but there are still some that are lingering, which is myself, my husband, another couple and some other people. There are seven of us total.

“It is kind of sad because everyone here all became like family. A lot of people do not get money until the first of the month; so a lot of us have been here for days. My husband was just approved for unemployment so we have to wait for his unemployment check to move.

“Yes, there are a number of people who were disabled. For us, it was less rent to stay here, but the sad part about it was my husband was just diagnosed with pancreatic cancer; he had a couple of procedures done. He could not keep up with work because he was so sick so they fired them. We got a little behind on rent here, but we did get caught up.

Speaking on the abrupt eviction of hundreds of tenants, she said: “The person who was taking the rent knew all about it; we should have had a thirty-day notice. But, we got a notice

on the door and we had to get out in 48 hours. The police say they do not want to be involved because they say it is a 'civil matter'."

The plight of Royal Oak Inn residents mirrors what is happening on a wider scale in the City of Detroit proper, where many are forced to resort to desperate measures to avoid homelessness. For years the city has done nothing to protect tenants. Properties all over the city are neglected by absentee landlords, some amounting to nothing but investment schemes speculating on real estate.

Single-family homes were scooped up after the 2008 crash. Landlords' business model was based on buying up foreclosed housing, renting out the property and performing little or no upkeep. Landlords built up back property tax bills, then when the house becomes utterly dilapidated, they abandoned them to foreclosure by the city. Later they would buy back the same properties for sums as low as \$500 at tax auction and start the process all over again.

Since 2005 more than one in three Detroit properties—139,699 of 384,672—have been foreclosed either because of mortgage arrears or property tax delinquency. As neighborhoods became more blighted, property values suffered. Over half of those that do actually own a home in Detroit owe more to the banks than the houses are worth.

Tens of thousands of homeowners have been foreclosed and their homes seized by Wayne County for back property taxes. Instead of assisting homeowners or providing adequate housing, the city has torn down tens of thousands of houses under a controversial demolition program run with federal housing funds.

Along with foreclosures and evictions, extortionate utility bills are a factor in housing distress. By January of this year 83,000 residential water accounts had already gone through the shutoff process since Detroit began its cruel offensive four years before to deny water to residents. The shut offs were part of the city plan to reassure investors as part of its bankruptcy negotiations. They have served to drive families out of their homes.

Evictions are now a regular occurrence in this downward spiral of want. The *Detroit News* reported Detroit has averaged 35,000 eviction cases a year since 2009 with the city losing an estimated 41,000 residents since 2010.

"How is this possible?" said Latasha Tucker, one mother of two young boys interviewed about her experiences in eviction court by the *Detroit News*. "I am being evicted from a place that I shouldn't even be living in. ... But we have nowhere else to go. I am lost." Sewage and black sludge bubbled from a basement toilet and floor drains for five months in her west side rental, according to the *News*.

An East Side Detroit resident told the *World Socialist Web Site* she had been to eviction court three times in an attempt

to get the landlord to address violations. She commented, "It is a very sorry thing to see the terrible things these families are going through. They come in one after another and they are overwhelmed and it is so awful."

The severe housing crisis in Detroit and its environs belies the incessant declarations by local politicians that Detroit is experiencing a "comeback" based on upscale downtown development. According to a 2017 report from the Urban Institute, *The Housing Affordability Gap for Extremely Low-Income Renters in 2014*, Wayne County, which includes inner-ring suburbs west and south of Detroit as well as the city proper, experienced a large increase in Extremely Low-Income (ELI) renters over about a decade and a half. ELI rental households went from 88,945 in 2000 to 101,259 in 2014 in Wayne County, which contains Detroit as the largest municipality.

Meanwhile, Detroit billionaires such as the Ilitch family and Quicken Loan CEO Dan Gilbert are profiting handsomely as city residents struggle.

The Ilitch family is heir to the Little Caesar's pizza empire, and this summer pocketed \$324 million in tax breaks awarded to build a new stadium in Midtown Detroit for their Red Wings hockey team.

Recently, *Crain's Detroit Business* listed team owner Marian Ilitch as one of the richest sports team owners in the US, with a net worth of \$5.2 billion. That tidy sum, however, was exceeded by Dan Gilbert's net worth pegged at \$5.8 billion. Gilbert is seeking hundreds of millions more in tax breaks for his real estate ventures in downtown.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact