

Detroit City government insists demolitions go forward, ignoring health dangers and unmet housing needs

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Despite the dire lack of affordable housing, the City of Detroit continues to demolish houses and apartments at a rapid pace, presenting the effort as “blight removal.” The city is asking voters to approve a \$250 million debt initiative on the November ballot to rip down even more existing structures. The proposal comes as evidence has been brought to light that the city has ignored for years a recommendation from a task force from its own health department that it halt non-emergency demolitions during the summer months in certain neighborhoods where children have particularly high levels of lead in their blood.

In 2017, a Detroit Health Department task force examined the records of more than 50,000 children and issued a report stating that the aggressive demolition schedule may have resulted in blood lead levels in children well beyond the 5 micrograms per deciliter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$) level deemed to be particularly dangerous (there is no level of lead in the blood that medical experts accept as safe). The report’s authors wrote that the “risk of increased BLLs [blood lead levels] is most significant for demolitions occurring during the months of May through September and for children living very close (within 200 feet) of the demolition.” The panel recommended halting non-emergency demolitions during these months (emergency demolitions being those in which the building is imminent danger of collapse).

The city announced in 2018 that it would halt non-emergency demolitions in the summer months for particular areas with the highest concentrations of children with higher blood lead levels. Notwithstanding the announcement, an analysis conducted by the *Detroit Free Press* and *Type Investigations*, a non-profit media organization, found that the city continued with non-emergency demolitions during the summers of 2018 and 2019. Of the 218 demolitions conducted from May through September of those years in the highest risk zip codes, 105 (48 percent) were non-emergency.

Seven percent of Detroit children under the age of six who were tested for lead were found to have levels above the $5\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ threshold. This amounts to more than 3,000 children in this age category alone.

Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, a Democrat, has sped up demolitions since taking office in 2014. A federal grant of \$265 million was used to demolish more than 15,000 homes during his administration. More than 22,000 additional properties are marked for demolition, but this activity has largely stopped with the cessation of federal financing. The city’s demolition department has just \$9.5 million in its annual budget, which allows for only emergency demolitions. The “blight removal” program is, according to the city’s health department, the largest in the world. The city council endorsed the ballot proposal after rejecting it earlier this year. The \$250 million, it says, is to be used to tear down 8,000 homes and preserve 8,000 more.

During the earlier demolition work allegations were also made about improper billing by contractors for dirt used to fill the lots after the removal of the remnants of the house. A 2019 investigation by the *Detroit News* turned up emails that referred to overcharging for dirt fill. Contractors, particularly in the earliest years, charged what they wished for the fill, only later having to substantiate their costs. Excess billing was noted to the tune of thousands of dollars per property. In the summer of 2019, former employees for one contractor pleaded guilty for seeking to bribe officials and rig bids.

The demolition of houses, it hardly need be added, does nothing to address the immense need for safe housing for Detroiters. Michigan as a whole has a shortage of 190,000 affordable housing units, a considerable proportion in Detroit.

The median household income in the city is just over \$31,000 per year, less than half of that for the US as a whole. The average rent for an apartment is \$1,068 per month, more than 40 percent of the average household’s income and well beyond affordable for those living on Social Security or unemployment payments, with more than 20 percent of those looking for work unable to find it amidst the COVID pandemic.

While much is made in the corporate media about the “revitalization” of the city, including new construction, much of the new housing being built is aimed at those able to pay \$500,000 and up. In fact, the demolition of properties, which will force thousands from their homes, can be expected to

further drive up rental prices as workers become increasingly desperate to find shelter.

There are tens of thousands of households that either live in substandard housing with incomplete kitchens or plumbing or pay at least 50 percent of their income toward rent.

Furthermore, Detroit residents have faced the danger of foreclosure for years. In thousands of cases this was exacerbated by the city's practice of overcharging for property taxes and then seizing homes when residents could not make the payments. Roughly 88,000 residents of the city lost their housing in 2017, that is, more than one in eight **in a single year**. Currently, amid the COVID pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control has issued a moratorium on evictions. This is only a pause, however, and expires at the end of 2020, putting tens of thousands more at risk of losing their homes.

The city went through the largest US municipal bankruptcy in 2013-14, cutting pensions for retirees and committing to austerity for years to come. Today, the bonds it issues remain three levels below investment grade and it is adhering to Wall Street's insistence that it focus on cost-cutting, particularly as it will be required to increase its contributions to pension funds in 2024.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Terrence, an apartment resident who recently received a notice on his door despite the ban on evictions. The building lies within zip code 48206, one of the five designated as being most dangerous for children's blood lead levels.

Terrence began, "The landlord abandoned the building last year. There has been no heat for a year and now. Just recently, the hot water has been turned off too. The buildings are not inspected by the city before these out-of-state landlords come in and buy them up. They get as much rent as they can out of them and do not fix anything, do not keep them up, and then they abandon them. They do not pay their taxes, so the building goes back to the city. I looked it up and this building is more than three years behind on its taxes.

"I have communicated with everyone from the federal government down to the local authorities and have gotten nowhere with help to save the building..."

"When I called HUD [the US federal housing agency] I wanted to get money to do weatherization and help save the building and keep a place to live for all the people here. They did not think it was a good idea to send help to fix all the problems in the building and keep it from being torn down. I believe they simply went to the mayor's office about the code violations and had them come out.

"When the inspectors showed up from the city, I thought they were coming to help with weatherization, to fix the building so we did not have to go another winter with no heat. But that is not what the mayor's office was interested in. They wanted us out.

"After the inspector came and found all the violations, people from the city came around and put a sign on each door saying

we had seven days to get out. The building is condemned. The door knocker tag had a number to call, but I don't know how many people have been helped. We need more time, more than 7 days to get out!"

"It is not good to move quickly like this because you don't end up getting the kind of home you really need. You don't have time to look around and consider your options. The waiting list for Section 8 subsidized housing programs is years long according to people I spoke to.

"I found an apartment with emergency help. I called the number on the knocker from the city. I spoke to someone in the Mayor's office and I told the woman I had a place but that I was concerned about the other people. She told me that I should just take care of myself and get out as fast as possible.

"I am on Social Security Disability. I see young mothers with children coming into the building, and there are a lot of elderly. Some others are disabled. I wonder if they're just trying to get me out of there because I was the one who was making the most noise about the situation.

"Here you could have had 32 apartments for \$600,000 or less. Instead they have a proposal on the ballot here in Detroit to come up with money to tear down more abandoned buildings. These contractors are getting tens of thousands of dollars to tear down one house. You could have left all these people where they are and fixed up the houses with that kind of money.

"I am scrambling around to move in the next couple of days, packing and so on. My neighbor here works and has to go in every day. Yet she is supposed to find someplace to go and then get packed and moved out in one week, all the while going to work every day."

The guiding principle behind the demolition program is that housing must be based on the accumulation of profit by large homebuilding firms, real estate giants, insurance industries, and the banks. Indeed, the removal of housing is aimed at driving up prices, thereby locking in gains for companies who bought up land on the cheap over the past two decades.

In contrast, a socialist program for housing would begin from the requirement that the working class requires safe housing. This, along with secure employment, health care, clean water, a pollution-free environment, and high-quality education, must be considered basic social rights. Making this ideal a reality requires a conscious fight on the part of all workers for genuine social equality, i.e., socialism.



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