

“People with vast means are salivating over our homes”

Detroit developers force artists out of downtown apartment building

By Zac Corrigan
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Today in downtown Detroit, with temperatures forecast in the negative double-digits, about 20 tenants, most of them young artists and musicians, are being evicted from their apartments at 1217 Griswold Street. They are the latest victims of the billionaire-orchestrated “development” plans for the city, which include evicting low-income residents to make way for an upscale housing and entertainment district.

In March 2013, their more than 100 neighbors at 1214 Griswold, a Section 8 rent-subsidized apartment building for seniors and disabled people, were given eviction notices. These tenants must be out by March 31, 2014. The artists were given just one month to vacate—their own eviction notices were slipped under their doors on January 28.

The two buildings face each other across Capitol Park, one of the areas targeted by capitalists associated with multi-billionaire Dan Gilbert, the Detroit area’s wealthiest resident. The Quicken Loans boss and real estate tycoon now owns more than 40 buildings in the downtown area. He has seen his personal wealth nearly quadruple since the crash of 2008 to an estimated \$3.9 billion today.

Gilbert and fellow billionaire Mike Ilitch—owner of the Detroit Red Wings and Tigers as well as Little Caesar’s Pizza and the Motor City Casino—are the chief beneficiaries of a massive land-looting operation facilitated by city, state and national government officials. The two have essentially been appointed the landlords of new Detroit, and they are remaking their new property in the image of a ruling elite that cannot abide the presence of poor retired workers and artists.

“We know that people with vast means and influence

are salivating over our homes,” said Margaret, an artist and musician who has lived in the building for years. “The fact that they are doing this in the worst winter in decades with minimal notice is a health and safety hazard. And they’re claiming the eviction itself is being done for safety reasons.”

Last month, Detroit’s city council approved a deal to hand over 45 blocks of downtown to Ilitch for up to 95 years, for a proposed new hockey arena and entertainment district controlled by his companies. He absurdly paid one dollar, and was given \$285 million in public money in return. As for Gilbert, he has been appointed to lead a newly-created Blight Removal Task Force to demolish abandoned properties in the city and drive up his own property values; Detroit’s state-appointed emergency manager Kevyn Orr allocated \$500 million toward the project as part of his “plan of adjustment.”

The land grabs and evictions are part of a social counterrevolution being spearheaded in Detroit. A historic center of world auto production, as well as militant working class struggles, Detroit once had the highest standard of living of any major American city. Today, after decades of deindustrialization by the auto companies, facilitated by the United Auto Workers, and decades of Democratic Party budget cuts, the city is in ruins and the gap between rich and poor is at historic levels.

Now, the very wealthy and their representatives in both political parties are railroading Detroit through the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history, which attacks not only affordable housing, but pensions, health care, culture, transportation, education, parks—not to mention democratic rights. The

bankruptcy has the explicit approval of the Obama administration, which sees it as an experiment for the restructuring of other major American cities in line with current levels of social inequality.

The evicted artists have been paying \$550 per month to rent lofts, which are 2,500 square feet each in the heart of downtown. Now the downtown area is set to have rents raised to “market rates,” which have been projected to rise to as much as \$2 per square foot—nearly a tenfold increase.

Gilbert’s real estate firm, Bedrock, purchased 1217 Griswold in October of 2013 and quickly created the pretense that the building was too dangerous for occupancy. In fact, the city and previous landlords ignored the relative state of disrepair for years, despite complaints from tenants. The building has been the site of a local music and art hub for decades, maintained through the personal investment and labor of the residents.

“The only reason this building is not an empty shell is that the residents themselves have spent the time and money to fix it up,” said Margaret. “My old roommate patched up the elevator shaft, among many other things. The previous owners, Alpha Electric, were slumlords. Some units had inconsistent water, heat and electricity. One of the tenants tried to force the owners to make basic repairs. An inspector came and said he was going to file a really damning report on the conditions. But somehow that got dragged into the courts and at the end of the day the owners didn’t have to do anything. So the fact that the building is in disrepair is not news to anyone.

“Bedrock has repeatedly misled us and is extremely reluctant to put anything specific in writing. They told us they would provide \$2,000 for moving expenses, but we don’t get it until after we’ve moved out. I wrote them an email saying I don’t have the liquidity to pay for my move and wait for a reimbursement, but they never wrote back. They always phone and just tell us that it’ll be OK. And they haven’t put in writing what state the place is expected to be in for us to receive the money. So who knows if we’ll actually get anything—and they still expect February rent!

“We got in touch with Bedrock early on when they bought the building last Halloween. They said they weren’t sure what was going to be happening. A manager from Bedrock said over the phone, ‘don’t

worry its not like we’re going to kick you guys out in the middle of winter, you’ll have plenty of notice.’”

Bedrock has employed bullying tactics to coerce the residents into bowing to their demands. After a goodbye party in the building last Friday, Bedrock addressed a letter to all tenants informing them that “we will only be permitting access to residents and 1-2 guests per apartment,” and “no parties of any kind will be permitted in the building. We have requested that Detroit Police and/or our private Security Officers be present at the building at all times.” Margaret noted that the presence of WSWS reporters in her apartment put her at the limit.

Since this notice was sent out, a security van has been parked 24 hours a day in front of the building with its spinning yellow light turned on to intimidate residents. Bedrock employees have also been seen entering the building and defacing wall murals. The company also has not waited until the residents vacate to begin installing a network of surveillance cameras around the building.

Speaking of the evictions across the park, fellow artist Carlos said, “It’s hard to pick the worst thing about this, but the fact that the seniors are being kicked out must be number one.” Pinned to his door is a copy of the Open Letter written by the seniors last year, appealing to the working class of Detroit to join them in defending housing as a social right. “This letter has become the number one most shared thing on the Citizens of Capitol Park Facebook page,” he said. Carlos attended a demonstration called by the senior tenants in October.

He concluded, “When you look at it retrospectively, you can see they’ve been planning this for a long time. There’s a long history of displacement in Detroit; neighborhoods like Black Bottom, Brush Park, Comerica and Ford Field, and now Cass Corridor and Capitol Park. What can we do to break this cycle?”

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