

Debra Ann Washington Miller—A Fighter for the Working Class

January 18, 1952–December 1, 2018

By Helen Halyard
8 December 2018

It is with great sadness that the *World Socialist Web Site* reports the recent death of Debra Ann Washington Miller, an active supporter of the Socialist Equality Party in Detroit who played a significant role in mobilizing workers against evictions in the downtown area. Miller participated in the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit conducted by the SEP that exposed the political conspiracy embracing major political parties, the courts and the media to destroy rights won by workers in over 80 years of struggle.

A native of Detroit, Debra's grandfather was active in the Teamsters union and she would often recall the bitter battles that were necessary in an earlier period to achieve decent jobs and living standards. She watched in horror as the unions declined and presided over one plant shutdown after another. Debra was an autoworker for a brief period of time and a member of the UAW, but spent most of her career as a nursing home assistant. She was very sensitive to the needs of the elderly population and insisted they be treated with dignity.

The Socialist Equality Party first met Debra in the summer of 2013. In May of that year, all the tenants at the building where she lived, 1214 Griswold Street, were given eviction notices after new owners purchased the property. The evictions and sweetheart deals given to developers in downtown Detroit were part of a drive to rid the area of low-income residents as the downtown area was being gentrified. The building was located around the corner from Detroit billionaire Dan Gilbert's Quicken Loans and a few blocks from the late billionaire Mike Ilitch's entertainment district centered on a new Detroit Red Wings professional hockey arena.

Debra and a group of other tenants at Griswold, many who lived in the building for over 20 years and looked out for each other, organized a fight against the evictions and initially appealed to the United Tenants Council and the Detroit City Council, both dominated by the Democratic Party, for support.

After months of fighting and explaining that the evictions amounted to a death sentence for residents, a few token concessions were given to tenants to help with moving costs while the Council sided with the developers to force the tenants out of the area.

It was following this experience that Debra Miller drew conclusions about the class nature of the Democratic Party and its support for the capitalist profit system. She supported the mayoral campaign of D'Artagnan Collier running as the Socialist Equality Party's candidate in Detroit independently of both parties and on a socialist program.

Debra denounced the Democratic Party and the role of the unions who stood by as the right to jobs, decent housing and living standards were destroyed by the ruling elites. She remarked at several meetings in encouraging workers and youth to get involved, "Where is the UAW? AFSCME? Why haven't they called a general strike? None of them are going to help us. We have to help ourselves."

From that point until she became ill with cancer in the spring of 2015, Debra participated in SEP campaigns to oppose the sale of artworks from the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) and the looting of city worker pensions during the Detroit bankruptcy and to fight water and utility shutoffs.

On October 4, 2013, Debra organized a delegation of tenants to attend the demonstration organized by the

SEP in defense of the DIA commenting, “They want to take everything away from us including the art. They are running all the low-income people out of downtown. What does gentrification mean? You replace one class of people with another class. They continuously talk about the rebirth of Detroit, but it is a rebirth that doesn’t include people like myself. It is like a tale of two cities.”

A fighter for the working class, Debra opposed racial and identity politics and loved engaging in discussion with SEP members on questions of theory and history. She was particularly fond of young people and students involved with the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, emphasizing that they had to fight for a better future.

After watching the documentary film *Tsar to Lenin* with archival footage chronicling the October 1917 revolution, she remarked, “We did it. The working class took power then and we can do it again.” She organized several showings of the film among tenants followed by questions and discussion.

Debra was imbued with a profound confidence in the revolutionary potential that exists in the international working class. She was a fighter and understood that while workers may not win every single battle, they cannot give up and need to draw lessons from their experiences to win the big war.

After tenants moved out of the Griswold building, as predicted three residents died living in other housing facilities. They were left on their own and lacked the long-standing friendships that existed in Griswold.

The WSWS asked Debra what lessons she learned from this experience. She replied, “Working people need to come together and take control. We need to run things. The rich are trying to destroy our spirit and our souls and the only way we can prevent this from happening is to become educated and learn to think for ourselves. The issue is not protesting to the existing system but of changing it as a whole.”

Debra was encouraged by the resurgence of the class struggle this year and applauded the fight of the West Virginia teachers who organized a strike to defend public education outside of and independently of the trade unions.

In one of her last interviews on the WSWS earlier this year, Debra remarked, “We need new fighting organizations not only to defend our social right to a

good paying job, education and health care, but also to speak for us politically. West Virginia Governor Jim Justice shows that there is not a bit of difference between Democrats and Republicans, and working people need to take power for themselves. This is something that needs to be done all over the world.”

The WSWS and SEP extend their deepest condolences to the family of Debra Ann Washington Miller, a courageous fighter for the working class to the very end.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>