

Support builds for demonstration to defend Detroit Institute of Arts

By Jerry White
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Momentum is building for the October 4 demonstration called by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to oppose the selloff of the masterpieces of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA).

The collection of the world-famous DIA is currently being appraised by Christie's auction house as part of the plans by Detroit's emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, to sell off the city's public treasures to satisfy the demands of the Wall Street banks and other creditors.

The SEP and IYSSE are holding a public demonstration on Friday, October 4 at 5:30 p.m. on Woodward Avenue in front of the DIA. Supporters are using social media, newsletters, posters, fliers and other printed material to promote the demonstration, and have reached out to auto workers, Detroit city workers, college and high school students, artists and professionals to oppose the looting of the museum.

There is overwhelming opposition to the measures being imposed by Orr. The unelected emergency manager is targeting the DIA as part of his plans to "restructure" the city. This includes gutting the pension and health care benefits of more than 30,000 current and retired city workers, privatizing public lighting, transportation and garbage collection, and selling off everything from artwork to the Belle Isle park and animals of the Detroit Zoo.

According to a recent poll from the *Detroit Free Press* and WXYZ-TV, 75 percent of Detroit residents oppose any cuts to pensions. An even greater proportion, 78 percent, said they oppose the sale of any DIA art. This opposition, however, finds no political expression outside of the campaign of the SEP and IYSSE.

The entire political establishment—from Michigan's Republican governor and Democratic-controlled city

government to the Obama administration and the trade unions—insist that workers pay for a crisis they did not create. Meanwhile, the auto companies are making record profits and the emergency manager is handing hundreds of millions to subsidize a new hockey arena for billionaire Mike Ilitch.

On Saturday, the SEP and Wayne State University IYSSE held a lively rally at Detroit's Eastern Market. Lawrence Porter, the SEP assistant national secretary, used a bullhorn to address shoppers at the market, chanting "Hands off the DIA!" and "Art belongs to the people of Detroit, not Wall Street."

He rejected the specious position of leading trade union officials who support the selloff of the art, saying the proceeds were needed for pensions and essential services. Orr, he said, was attacking both the art *and* pensions, and both of these essential rights could only be defended by an independent struggle of the working class, which rejects the bogus claim that there was no money. As many shoppers turned to listen with interest, Porter called on them to join and build the October 4 protest. "The attack on the working class must stop and this is where we have to start the fight back," he said.

Several workers and young people stopped to talk to the WSWS.

William Joyce McTighe, a professional, recently moved to Detroit, where he grew up, from New York City. "I am shocked about the DIA. I had the privilege of studying with one of the curators of the DIA, Paul Grigaut, who organized many of the donations from families in Grosse Pointe," he said.

"I was at the University of Michigan and graduated in 1968, a very famous year. Professor Grigaut said the paintings and all the donations from the families in Grosse Pointe were for the DIA, but mainly for the people of Detroit.

“I am back and want to get involved because I don’t believe its proper what is planned or even being discussed. These are not paintings for banks or hedge funds. These are for the people of Detroit.

“This is very similar to the 1930s when Berlin, under the regime of Adolph Hitler, sent scouts and art historians to museums in Paris and throughout France and Italy where they marked art that they were interested in. And when they won and conquered these countries they went and took what they wanted. This art never belonged to Germany. They did the same thing to Jewish families—they went in and took them, or made the Jewish families sell very famous art to galleries at rather discount prices.

“This should not happen in Detroit.”

Rika Mouw is an artist who lives in Alaska and has family connections to one of the curators at the DIA. “My husband has roots in Detroit and we have been coming to the museum for years,” she said. “We are members of the DIA and we live in Alaska. The arts are really the core. They are food for the soul just like food is for your stomach. They are food for the mind.

“It is just really disturbing to hear that the city is thinking of bankrupting the cultural core of Detroit. We all have the right to access art. It is a pity that it is being cut out of the schools and then out of a public institution like the DIA. It’s like death by a thousand cuts for the human spirit and human history—the core of what makes us tick. Art has always been a window to something bigger than ourselves. It’s a window to other people’s thoughts; it is another voice.

“Food is one thing and water is another. They are both essentials, but art is an essential too. So access to it for all classes, for all levels—to be able to come to an institution like the DIA—is just critical. We don’t just eat, we think, too.”

Commenting on Diego Rivera’s murals she said, “It’s incredible—they’re like Michelangelo’s chapel.”

Noting Rivera’s emphasis on the working class, she added, “This collection is really the people’s collection. It belongs to the people. It is more valuable kept intact for all people rather than divided up and broken up into private collections where nobody sees it. As an artist, I would rather have my work seen by many, many thousands rather than one guy at his dining room table. I am an artist and everybody wants their work to be seen by the broadest audience possible.

To cut that off from the public and the artist is a shame. It’s criminal.”

Katie Craig is a mural artist and student at Cranbrook Art Academy, just north of Detroit. A mural by Katie Craig [Flickr user BB and HH] is available on Flickr.

“They’re trying to take and destroy art work that belongs to the community,” she said. “If I hadn’t seen a van Gogh when I was seven years old on a school trip to the DIA I wouldn’t be at Cranbrook now. I’m a mural artist and I want to go to the demonstration to defend the DIA. We have 150 to 200 students in my studio. We should be getting all the local artists together to stop the selloff of the DIA.

“It’s outrageous that they’ve already priced Picassos and other pieces of art. It’s just like the way they want to privatize everything else. I can’t believe it. Put me on a podium... I want to stop this.”

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