

”We can’t erase history to suit people’s feelings”

San Francisco residents voice opposition to censorship of George Washington High School murals

By Evan Blake and Alex Gonzalez
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The San Francisco Unified School Board voted unanimously Tuesday night to destroy or cover over 13 left-wing murals depicting the contradictory life of George Washington. The move to censor the murals, painted on the walls of George Washington High School by Communist Party member Victor Arnautoff in 1936 as part of the New Deal-funded Works Progress Administration, represents a right-wing attack on art and history, as noted in our coverage.

More than 200 people attended Tuesday’s school board meeting, including current students, alumni, teachers and concerned community members, to speak in favor of or against the censorship of the murals.

World Socialist Web Site reporters interviewed attendees at the event, which was sharply polarized and contentious. Many spoke on the need to contextualize the murals. Both current and retired teachers at the school explained they taught students the remarkable historical background to the murals and the unique fresco technique used to create them, the same technique employed by famed artist Diego Rivera with whom Arnautoff worked closely.

Carol, an artist from Berkeley, said: “This is the largest of Arnautoff’s works. We are so lucky to have his works in San Francisco. The San Francisco general strike of 1934 allowed this mural to be painted. Arnautoff actually put slavery and Native Americans on the murals *on purpose*, so that they could be discussed and not ignored. The existence of racism will not be erased by destroying those images.”

Carol continued, “I am broken-hearted, but I will keep fighting. I wish that the school board would have

used this moment to teach students about the murals and their historical significance. It’s horrifying that they will spend over half a million dollars on censorship instead of projects that would actually benefit the students.”

George Wright, a retired Political Science Professor from Chico State, addressed the meeting in support of the murals. He explained to the WSWWS afterward, “The school board represents a petty bourgeois, opportunist, identity politics perspective in its most extreme form and a lack of understanding of what education is about. They don’t listen to reason about the intent of the murals. From the very beginning in the original Reflection and Action Group appointed by the board, eight out of ten members of the group were already against the murals. The onus is on the board for allowing this issue to fester and become so polarized.”

Dean Ferguson, who spoke in support of the murals at the meeting noted, “You don’t see unity here because the analysis is based on a particular group. Identity politics has superseded the politics of class. No board member addressed the objections raised by black artist Dewey Crumpler who said that the murals he painted in response to Arnautoff’s work would make no sense if Arnautoff’s work was obliterated. Really, what response can you offer to a sheet of bolted plastic or 1,600 square feet of blank plaster? What dialogue can you have with a voice that’s been silenced?”

“When my daughters went to Washington High School, they passed by Arnautoff’s mural every day. To their knowledge, none of their fellow students found his work objectionable. No one said ‘Meet me at the

dead Indian,' a statement my daughters dismissed as ludicrous, but which they're using to justify destroying the murals. Like so many Washington graduates, my daughters want to see the mural saved."

Olivia Ramos graduated from George Washington High School in 2016, and felt strongly that the murals should be kept. "Without teaching ourselves about our history, we will not be able to better ourselves. It is said that those who forget history are prone to relive it. We can't erase history to suit people's feelings."

Frances, who works at an arts non-profit in San Francisco, commented: "This artist was committed to social justice in his lifetime. Our founding fathers have been valorized without recognition of being slaveholders or the horrors of Western migration, and the mural reveals that. In many ways George Washington was a great man, but he also participated in some pretty horrific historic practices."

At the meeting, the general false argument put forward by those advocating the destruction of the murals was that they *celebrate* slavery and genocide. In response to this conception, Frances said, "If I just confronted the mural without any context, I can see why one would question it. I feel terrible that students are feeling that this is an insult to them, a reminder of the pains of slavery and murder, but I'm opposed to censoring the mural. I'd like to see it presented in context, because in fact it's a critique of those policies, not a celebration."

Paul Denear, a local artist in San Francisco, praised Arnautoff's murals, stating: "I'm here to speak in opposition to the idea of destroying or covering the murals. This is an art treasure, and it would be such a waste of money to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to cover it. The murals should not be censored at all."

Denear continued, "I would say 90 percent of the people in that room have never seen the murals, they've maybe seen them online. I've seen the murals in person and they're spectacular. If I were to speak in favor of keeping the murals, I'd be accused of being a racist, and I'm not a racist. I think that the School Board is just grandstanding for higher office, I don't think they care about schools at all."

"The murals are not racist. What, should we have Washington chopping down a cherry tree? No, this is the truth, he had slaves. I think it's a tremendous

teaching opportunity. They should be teaching the students why the murals were painted the way they were and how incredible they are. There are plenty of terrible murals in the city, and that's not one of them. That is an art treasure, and I'd rate it with any great art treasure in the world. It's an amazing accomplishment."

Steven Chun, the George Washington High School Board Director of Campus Engagement, expressed his strong disagreement with covering up the murals. He told us, "On the board, we acknowledged that it might be tough for some students to look at the murals. We think that discussing history can be painful, but history has to be taught so that history is not repeated."

Noting the crowd of over 200 people who had assembled for the event, Steven commented on the broader significance of censoring artwork, asking, "If you erase George Washington, where does it end?"

Jaumal, a local resident, was not aware of the proposal to cover over the murals. When our reporters explained the broader significance of moves to censor the artwork, he said, "Are the murals telling the truth? If so, what's wrong with them? George Washington was a contradictory man, he did some bad things, but he also fought in a revolutionary war."

When we asked him about the role of art in society, he said, "Art is a creative tool. It opens up new channels in your mind. It should be used to teach. Young people should be exposed to these things, I think the education spectrum today is too narrow."

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