

Comments from August 13 SFUSD school board meeting

Supporters of the “Life of Washington” mural in San Francisco speak their minds

By Toby Reese
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At Tuesday’s meeting of the San Francisco Unified School District Board of Education (SFUSD), numerous speakers eloquently addressed the issues involved in the censorship of Victor Arnautoff’s “Life of Washington” mural. Several of them spoke with the WSWs as well.

Robert W. Cherny, professor emeritus of history at San Francisco State University, a leading figure in the campaign to defend Arnautoff’s work, pointed out that the proposal to cover the murals with panels instead of permanently destroying them was “not a compromise,” but a “pre-determined outcome to block the murals from being seen.” (Robert Cherny was recently interviewed about the murals in a video produced by the WSWs)

George Wright, a retired Political Science Professor from California State University, Chico, explained that this episode “shows a couple of things—one, it has exposed the opportunism and ignorance of the Democratic Party operatives represented by the school board and, second, it has exposed the bankruptcy of identity politics, which is a poison that prevents us from understanding the reality of our society. We need to have a class analysis.”

Speaking to the WSWs after the meeting, Wright pointed out—importantly—that while “the school board is claiming to defend ‘people of color,’ at the same time, they are carrying out austerity. The next item on the agenda after the murals was in fact about bus drivers for the SFUSD begging the school board not to privatize the busing of students with a private company. The bus drivers are here trying to explain how there are federal standards of safety for the construction and operation of school busses.”

In another passionate defense of the murals, Carol Denney of Berkeley, California, who has previously spoken with the WSWs, told the meeting:

“It is no compromise for this board to refrain from destroying a priceless New Deal work of art but continue to promote obscuring it from students or from the public at large. The school board is entitled to cling to its deliberate misinterpretation of Victor Arnautoff’s work, but a wider public knows how brave it is even to acknowledge the exploitation upon which our nation was and is based.

“The school board and its supporters are entitled to have or to claim to have a traumatic reaction to anything they please, including the American flag, but to constantly describe our high school students as incapable of distinguishing between exploitation and the critical observation of exploitation as represented by the artwork, or unable to manage critical thought, or forever in need of protection from provocative ideas, is more obscene to me than anything you could put up on a wall.”

Tamaka, an elder of the Oklahoma Choctaw (Chahta) Tribe, has been an ardent defender of the murals. “I believe that those murals are our evidence that genocide happened.” He went on to explain that today many Native American youth are offered drugs by therapists as a way to cope with their trauma but instead they should be given an education, “They are going to face trauma outside of school too, where’s their safe space then?”

Lope Yap Jr., the sole defender of Arnautoff’s work within the Reflection and Action Group organized by the school board to recommend action on the murals, spoke on behalf of the Alumni Association at George

Washington High School. “We support the SFUSD staff recommendation not to whitewash or destroy the murals, but the board now must go further and abandon its plan to cover or censor any of the mural panels. The Association’s members stand by to help develop a curriculum interpretive program to educate current students and future generations about the history they portray.”

Jean has studied Art History at San Francisco City College and University of California, Berkeley. He was ejected by the school board and refused the opportunity to speak to the meeting, but he spoke to us afterward. Jean was excited to point out Leon Trotsky’s defense of art in a book he had recently acquired with selected works by Trotsky entitled, *Art and Revolution: Writings on Literature, Politics, and Culture*.

“I think Victor Arnautoff was a whistle blower, he was the first person in the United States to showcase George Washington as a slave owner,” Jean explained, “There was a man in line today to speak against the murals and he was holding up a book, *An American Genocide* by Benjamin Madley, which reviews the tragic history of Native Americans. I asked him, ‘Sir, were you traumatized by this book?’ to which he responded, ‘Yes.’ So, I said, ‘Well if you’re traumatized by this book then you should burn it, because this is what you’re doing to this mural.’ Because you’re traumatized by this mural, you’re going to destroy it? It doesn’t make sense to me, especially when it’s the first expository of something that was hidden from the population.

“On top of this, the reactionary perspectives of the last 44 presidents were covered up. Whitewashing history is how we got to president Trump today. Students at George Washington have been misinformed by the adults around them; I understand that it could be a painful image, but it’s for the rest of us too, those of us who may be immigrants or not privileged in this country.”

Actor Danny Glover, who attended Tuesday’s meeting, issued a statement the day before opposing the destruction of the murals. According to KPIX-TV, a CBS station in San Francisco, Glover said, “As a Washington High graduate, I’ve spent my entire life fighting for freedom and the right of artistic expression. Whether it was being in the forefront to bring about the first Black Studies Department in the country at San

Francisco State or being involved in films like *Color Purple* and most recently *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*, my record is clear and unambiguous.”

“I am for freedom of expression and against artistic censorship,” the actor said in his statement. “I view Arnautoff’s murals, as they were for me, a reminder of the horrors of human bondage and the mistreatment of native peoples, even by the father of our country. To destroy them or block them from view would be akin to book burning. We would be missing the opportunity for enhanced historic introspection this moment has provided us.”

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