

# Why I support the Detroit Institute of Arts and oppose the millage

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As a fervent admirer of the Detroit Institute of Arts, I am writing to express my strong agreement with Barry Grey's statement "Questions of political principle in the defense of culture: Why we oppose the Detroit Institute of Arts millage."

The statement points out a critical issue: "Support for a tax increase on the people implies an extension of political confidence to the political establishment and the corporate elite it represents." This is an issue of principle. If we willingly vote to hand our money to the government, we trust them to carry out our wishes. The facts and history of the criminal policies carried out by the Democrats and Republicans bear this out. Last week Detroit Mayor David Bing, a Democrat whose administration has cut the funding for the museum from \$375,000 to zero, was the main spokesman at the DIA rally for the millage.

This millage is most definitely part of a pattern of "denying public funds to vital social and cultural services and then demanding that the general population pay higher taxes to make up the shortfall." Again and again, workers are set up in this way.

The most beloved institutions—the Detroit Zoo and now the Institute of Arts—are used as bait to inveigle workers to increase their taxes. One cannot help noting that there has never been a millage to supplement the governor's pay package or to fund tax breaks for the wealthy, much less a millage-style referendum on what have become endless wars. These would be too politically dangerous for the ruling elite. The unpopular policies are just paid for; the popular ones are fair game for millages.

Michigan history bears out the fact that the proposed millage is exactly a transfer of costs from government to the working class. It resoundingly exposes the lie that there is no money for the arts or schools or other social needs.

\* "Special assessments" were developed in this state in

the 1970s alongside the policy of tax abatements for industry, Public Act 198 (Industrial Facilities Exemption). In other words, from the beginning, adding tax burdens on workers provided the means to give tax breaks to the "Big Three" automakers and other major businesses in the state.

\* As the Michigan economy continued to decline over the subsequent decades, both the Democrats and Republicans ruthlessly slashed funding for the arts in Michigan and the DIA in particular. The arts have been under what only can be described as an unremitting fiscal attack, a policy which has directly caused the present crisis.

\* When Republican Governor John Engler took office in 1991 he cut funding for the arts by 38 percent and froze all payments to the DIA. His office declared that the arts "didn't address the basic human needs of people." Prior to that time the DIA received nearly 60 percent of its \$26 million operating budget from the state.

\* By 2002, state funding for all arts organizations in the state was \$25.5 million. Under Democrat Jennifer Granholm's tenure, by 2009, this was cut to \$7.9 million, funding 290 organizations.

\* The unkindest cut of all came from Granholm's 2010 budget, which slashed arts funding to a paltry \$2 million. For most arts and humanities organizations, this meant a cut of half of their revenues. The Department of History, Arts and Libraries was eliminated.

\* Also in 2010, General Motors axed all charitable giving to the arts. As just one example, the net result of these combined state and corporate cuts for the Detroit Symphony was a loss of \$500,000.

\* State government funding to Michigan's arts and cultural sector was slashed a catastrophic 91 percent, as measured from 2002 to 2010 alone.

From these facts it is clear that today's bourgeoisie is utterly indifferent, if not hostile, to the preservation of

mankind's culture.

Simultaneously, the ruling elite—operating through both capitalist parties in the state—has transferred this wealth to big business, in the form of dramatic tax cuts. Under the false mantle of “helping business to create jobs” they abolished the Single Business Tax in 2007 and replaced it with the Michigan Business Tax, which provided lucrative tax breaks to the manufacturing industry alongside very significant reductions to property taxes for business.

Since 1990, the share of all taxes borne by Michigan businesses has dropped from 43 percent to 37.9 percent. This year, businesses are expected to receive another \$1.1 billion state tax break, as the Michigan Business Tax has itself been abolished as of 2012, and replaced by an even lower Corporate Income Tax structure. As a result, another \$1.7 billion windfall is projected for next year.

Continuing this path of draining the state's coffers, Governor Snyder has now called for abolishing the Industrial Personal Property Tax, a business tax, which would bankrupt municipalities and schools, diverting an additional estimated \$425 million back to big business.

These policies have constituted a huge shift in government funding away from all social needs, including the arts, to benefit the elite.

I would add that the defense of the arts is critical for the working class, which is, in fact, the only class that can look to the future and preserve the cultural heritage of the past. As socialists we fight for the defense of everything valuable in humanity's accumulated material and spiritual cultural heritage, which is one of the principal bases for changing society and rebuilding life along the lines of solidarity. This outlook is in stark contrast to the retrograde ravings of many of the pseudo radicals such as Diane Bukowski and many black nationalists who oppose the millage and seek to make it a racial issue.

The events mentioned in the WSWS statement—the attacks on the Detroit Institute of Arts and Diego Rivera's frescos, the centerpiece of the Detroit Institute of Arts, in 1932—refute such backward ideology.

Rivera describes in his autobiography\* the intense campaign for whitewashing or removing the frescos in Detroit spearheaded by pro-fascist anti-Semite Father Coughlin and other leading Detroit Catholics. He recalls the visit to him by a section of workers who described themselves as “some communists, some Trotskyists, some Democrats, some Republicans and some who belonged to no party.” He quotes their speech:

“Seriously, and most important of all, we wish to inform you of what we have done to express a fraction of our appreciation for the paintings you have given us.

“The Constitution of the State of Michigan permits its citizens to band together in the event that a group of individuals intends to destroy a part of the state's common wealth. In such a case, the citizens have the right to use any weapons at their disposal. As you well know, there has been much talk against your frescoes, and there have been rumors that hoodlums may come here to destroy them.

“We have therefore organized a guard to protect your work. Eight thousand men have already volunteered. To legalize our action, in accordance with the Constitution, we have already sent a document describing our purposes to the Governor of Michigan.”

“The following Sunday, my frescoes were put on view for the general public. The men guarding the entrance to the Institute asked identification of every visitor by having him write his name and address in a register. Despite this unusual precautionary step, the museum authorities were obliged to keep the doors open until half past one on Monday morning. At closing time, the register bulged with the names and addresses of eighty-six thousand citizens of Detroit. For the next several months, there was a continuous stream of people coming to the Institute to view my work.

“The battle of Detroit, however, continued a long time afterward. Father Coughlin, many Jesuits, and quite a few politicians—some as far away from the frescoes as New York—continued to rant against what I had done. Yet, among writers, men of science, university professors, and ordinary working people, I found defenders. I was gratified that Edsel Ford stood by me loyally. And until all the sound and fury had passed, my army of eight thousand, working in shifts, guarded my work from destruction.”

The position of the Socialist Equality Party, and its defense of the arts, speaks to such workers today.

\* Diego Rivera—My Art, My Life: An Autobiography (with Gladys March)



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