What the WSWS said about the Detroit Institute of Arts millage

15 June 2013

We are reposting below a statement originally published by the World Socialist Web Site *on August 3, 2012 opposing a property tax on residents of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. The millage was promoted by the political and corporate establishment of Detroit and Michigan, ostensibly to "save" the Detroit Institute of Arts from bankruptcy.*

In advance of the August 7 vote on the millage, the WSWS called for a "no" vote, explaining that the WSWS and Socialist Equality Party emphatically opposed the cuts in funding to the DIA imposed by both the Democratic and Republican parties, opposed the closure of the museum, and defended the right of working people and youth to full access to art and culture.

While we sympathized deeply with the desire of workers and middle-class people to save the museum, we explained, supporting the proposed tax increase implied extending political confidence to Democratic Mayor Bing, Republican Governor Snyder, the City Council and the corporate interests they represent. As a matter of socialist principal, the WSWS would not offer any such support.

Moreover, as we wrote, there was no reason to believe the claims of Bing and company that the acceptance of a tax increase would protect the DIA from further cuts or even closure. These were, after all, the very forces responsible for starving the DIA of funds—as well as the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Michigan Opera Theater, other museums, libraries and cultural institutions—and eradicating art and music education from the schools, laying off teachers and closing hundreds of schools. We called for a socialist response to the crisis of the DIA, based on a broadening of the struggle in defense of jobs, education, health care and cultural institutions. The only basis for defending the right of all people to have access to art and culture, we insisted, was the independent mobilization of the working class in opposition to the political and corporate establishment.

It took only nine months for our position to be vindicated by events. The threat by Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to sell off treasures from the collection of the DIA to pay off Detroit's bank bondholders and hedge fund speculators has demonstrated that the defense of art and culture is dependent on the building of a mass socialist movement of the working class.

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Questions of political principle in the defense of culture

By Barry Grey, 3 August 2012

On Tuesday, August 7 voters in three metro-Detroit counties will be asked to approve a 0.2-mill, ten-year property tax to support the Detroit Institute of Arts, one of the premier art museums in the US and the world. The millage proposal, if approved by voters in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, will generate an estimated $23 million a year for the DIA and cost the average home-owner $20 a year.

The DIA is warning that unless it obtains such a guaranteed flow of funding it will be unable to maintain its $25 million annual operating budget and be forced, in the short term, to drastically cut its hours, exhibits and programs, and, in the longer term, to shut its doors.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* do not support the millage proposal. Our opposition is not based on any indifference to the fate of the DIA. On the contrary, we sympathize deeply with the desire of workers and middle-class people to save this irreplaceable institution. However, the imposition of a new tax on the general population is not the appropriate response. Such a step has far-reaching implications that must be seriously worked through.

The millage vote takes place in the context of an unrelenting assault on art and culture in Detroit and nationally. The DIA, which in 1991 received $16 million a year from the State of Michigan, has seen its funding repeatedly cut under Democratic as well as Republican administrations. Today it receives zero dollars from the state and the City of Detroit. Democratic Mayor David Bing recently eliminated the museum's last $375,000 in government funds as part of a budget he imposed that slashes hundreds of jobs and cuts Detroit city workers' pay by 10 percent.

The DIA has already cut its budget by 20 percent, eliminated scores of jobs, reduced benefits and cut back on public programs in an attempt to survive. The city handed over the operation of the museum to a private authority in 2010.

The art museum's dilemma is part of a larger crisis of cultural institutions in Detroit. Last year the Detroit Science Center was forced to close. Subsidies to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Michigan Opera Theater, the Charles Wright Museum of African-American History and the Detroit Zoo have been cut. Libraries have been shut down and music and art classes largely eliminated in the public schools, hundreds of which have been closed over the past decade.

Two years ago, Detroit Symphony musicians were forced into a six-month strike that devastated the orchestra. Veteran musicians took a 25 percent pay cut, and many were forced to seek employment elsewhere.

The attack on art and culture in Detroit is part of a national trend. In 2011, over 70 percent of US museums reported they were in economic distress, including 18 percent—nearly one in five—that said they were in severe distress. A majority of museums saw a reduction in funding in 2010, especially in government support. Many responded with hiring freezes and budget reductions.

The closure of libraries and schools, elimination of art and music classes, and bankrupting of world class orchestras and opera companies is likewise a national phenomenon.

The Detroit Institute of Arts has a long and rich history that is closely linked to the struggles and life experiences of the working class of Detroit and Michigan. Founded in 1885, it was taken over by the city in 1919, when Detroit was undergoing rapid growth as the emerging center of world auto production.

In its early years, the DIA acquired a priceless collection of works by

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American masters. In the 1920s it expanded its collection to include works by European geniuses from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, including Bruegel, Rubens, Dürer, Rembrandt, van Gogh, Cezanne, Degas, Rodin, Matisse, Picasso and many more.

In 1932, Edsel Ford commissioned the great Mexican muralist Diego Rivera to produce the world famous series of frescoes, entitled *Detroit Industry*, that surround the marble court of the museum. Thousands of workers marched in Detroit to oppose demands by right-wing forces that the frescoes be destroyed.

That, however, was an earlier period in the development of American capitalism, when the bourgeoisie took pride in cultural achievements. Even a limited nurturing of culture belongs to a bygone era. Now these institutions are being defunded under conditions of economic crisis and a decline in the intellectual and cultural level of the bourgeoisie itself.

Museums, orchestras, and opera companies are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain funding in the midst of sweeping cuts in social spending by all levels of government and the growing reluctance of the rich and super-rich to financially support cultural institutions. Public access to art and culture is being restricted, along with access to education, decent-paying employment, housing and a secure retirement.

Now a gun has been put at the head of the metro-Detroit population to save the DIA by accepting higher taxes. There is great popular support for the museum, with 69 percent of likely voters backing the millage, according to a recent poll published by the *Detroit Free Press*. Large sections of professional people, youth and workers treasure the DIA and want to keep it open.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* deeply sympathize with these sentiments and stand in solidarity with the desire to preserve cultural institutions for the current and future generations. Art and culture are not luxuries. They are necessities of life, and the SEP insists that working people have a right to full access to art, music, dance, literature, drama and all other forms of artistic endeavor.

However, we cannot, on principle, support the millage campaign. Support for a tax increase on the people implies an extension of political confidence to the political establishment and the corporate elite it represents.

The official campaign in support of the millage, backed by Mayor Bing, leading politicians of both parties, and the corporate establishment, is suffused with hypocrisy. The very same people who are now posturing as high-minded supporters of the arts are directly responsible for cutting off funding to the DIA and throwing it into crisis.

There is, moreover, no basis for the claim that passage of the millage will solve the problems of the DIA, let alone the other cultural institutions that are being starved of funds. The DIA's plan is to use the funds generated by the new tax to cover most of its operating expenses so that it can concentrate on fund-raising to build up its endowment to $400 million by 2022. But as DIA Executive Vice President Annmarie Erickson has acknowledged, the $400 million goal depends on an increase in private donations plus an expanding economy with no major downturns. There is little prospect for such a development.

More fundamentally, the millage campaign is part of a larger pattern playing out across the country 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. Those who are inclined to respond pragmatically to the crisis of the DIA and say, "What else can we do but support the millage?" should consider the implications of this position.

The campaign by the corporate elite and its political mouthpieces for millages and other taxes will not end with the DIA. The same arguments will be used to "rescue" schools and libraries and ostensibly prevent the collapse of roads and bridges. This is a formula for ever-higher taxes on an ever-poorer population.

There is really nothing new in this attempt to blackmail the public into accepting a tax to save a socially critical institution. Again and again, in the midst of corporate downsizing and plant closures, working people have been told they have to accept wage cuts and speedup in order to "save" their factory. Parents and teachers are told they must pay out of their own pockets for books and other vital supplies in order to give children any chance of a decent education.

Working people have been put in this horrible situation above all because of the rottenness of the so-called "labor organizations," such as the United Auto Workers and the AFL-CIO. They have for decades collaborated with the corporations in destroying the jobs and living standards of workers, fighting to defend nothing except their own bloated salaries.

The DIA millage is but one more variant of the relentless drive to offload the crisis of the capitalist system onto the working class. Those who say there is no choice but to support the millage embrace an approach that tacitly accepts the framework of the present economic and political order, within which there is no end to the assault on the living standards and rights of working people. They should ask themselves how they end up standing shoulder to shoulder with reactionaries like Bing and his corporate paymasters. This approach inevitably leads to ever more opportunistic adaptations to bourgeois politics.

What is required is a socialist response. Rejection of the millage has to be accompanied by a broadening of the struggle in defense of jobs, education, housing, health care and cultural institutions.

There must be a massive expansion of government funding for art and culture, along with public education. But this requires the building of a mass working class political movement in opposition to the two parties of big business, and the fight for a workers' government.

It also requires a vast redistribution of wealth from the top to the bottom. The grip of the financial aristocracy over all aspects of policy must be broken. The ill-gotten fortunes of the Wall Street speculators must be seized and used to meet social needs. The banks and corporations must be nationalized and turned into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class, so that the wealth produced by the labor of workers can be used to meet social needs—including culture—rather than to satisfy the insatiable greed for private profit.

Our opposition to the millage, based on this socialist and revolutionary program, has nothing in common with the opposition of sections of the bourgeois establishment, including black nationalists who are seeking to make the crisis of the DIA a racial issue.

The defense of the DIA and art and culture in general is a crucial issue for the entire working class. It calls for a struggle to unite working people in opposition to the entire political and corporate establishment, and to fight for a socialist future in which material well-being and social equality will go hand in hand in with a leap in the cultural level of the people.

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