# The working class and the defense of the Detroit Institute of Arts

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**14 August 2013**

The recent announcement by Detroit's emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, that the city has hired Christie's auction house to appraise the value of the Detroit Institute of Arts' collection—with an eye to its possible sale for the benefit of the city's creditors—has appalled great numbers of people.

Anger is a healthy response as far as it goes, but the enormous national and international implications of the threat to Detroit's art museum have to be thought through and the necessary conclusions drawn.

The Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) brings together some of the most astonishing achievements of humanity in its effort to make sense of the world in the form of artistic imagery. One can feel only repugnance that the fate of these precious works lies in the unclean hands of financial looters and their lackeys.

The threat to the DIA, whether it is ultimately carried out or not, speaks to the threat to culture and all of the social rights of working people posed by the existing social order.

As Trotsky once explained, the coexistence of art and capitalist social relations remained possible only so long as the bourgeoisie "was capable of maintaining a regime both politically and morally 'democratic.'" The ruling elite, he continued, played up to artists and maintained certain institutions during the same epoch in which it granted "special privileges to the top layer of the working class" and mastered and subdued "the bureaucracy of the unions and workers' parties." As Trotsky pointed out, "All these phenomena exist in the same historical plane."

The crisis of global and American capitalism has made that coexistence a thing of the past. The threat to the DIA exists "in the same historical plane" as the devastation of workers' living conditions, the destruction of pensions and other benefits, and the condemnation of millions to social misery.

Without idealizing the robber barons and industrialists of the past, the present crisis has revealed a profound intellectual and cultural decline within the ruling elite. Detroit's wealthy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries built up the DIA's collection and, grudgingly or otherwise, made it accessible to the population. The example of the Russian Revolution and the labor upheavals of the 1930s convinced the city's elite that it had to make certain concessions to the cultural demands of the working class.

There is a direct connection between Detroit's role as the birthplace of assembly line production and the DIA's character and appeal. The Mexican artist Diego Rivera was drawn to the area in 1932-33 because of its massive automobile factories. He left an indelible proof of his artistic vision and social commitment in the form of his renowned frescos in the museum's center court. That episode and the history of the city's rebellious working class continue to rankle the ruling elite and account in no small part for its vindictiveness toward Detroit in general, and the DIA in particular.

At the time of the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared, "Art is a nation's most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves, and to others, the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish."

Of course, such a comment had a routine and obligatory element. However, it did reflect a different attitude toward arts institutions, especially under the conditions of the Cold War, during which the American establishment felt obliged to at least pay lip service to artistic innovation and provide some level of government support for the arts. The collapse of the

Soviet Union has encouraged the flourishing of the most philistine and criminal tendencies within America's ruling circles.

The DIA experience should be a warning to the working class everywhere. Under capitalism, art is a commodity to be bought and sold like any other. Nowhere are the powers that be guided by the concept that the cultural accomplishments of humanity *belong* to humanity. On the contrary, the aristocratic principle—as we have pointed out before—has made a comeback as part of the existing social order's decay and decline.

Along with crass financial motives, the threat against the DIA is driven by a strong feeling within the ruling class that great art exists for the sake of the elite's pleasure and satisfaction and that a city inhabited mostly by poor people has absolutely no right to such an institution. Speaking for many, Bloomberg columnist Virginia Postrel noted in June, "Great artworks shouldn't be held hostage by a relatively unpopular museum in a declining region. The cause of art would be better served if they were sold to institutions in growing cities where museum attendance is more substantial and the visual arts are more appreciated than they've ever been in Detroit."

Bound up with such anti-democratic conceptions is the ideological drive to deprive the working population of culture and intellectual awareness, thus rendering it more susceptible to the assault on its rights and conditions. If Trotsky was correct that "the art of past centuries has made man more complex and flexible, raising his psyche to a higher level and enriching his mind in many ways," and that "mastery of the old art is therefore a necessary prerequisite not only for the creation of a new art, but for the construction of a new society," then the hostility toward and fear of art evinced by the powers-that-be become all the more comprehensible.

The *New York Times* recently organized a dialogue on "Art in Hard Times," in which various contributors weighed in on "whether to sell works from the Detroit Institute of Arts to help pay the city's debts." The discussion took seriously the self-serving claims by Orr and other Detroit officials that the preservation of the DIA's collection needs to be weighed against "the pensions of thousands of firefighters, nurses, police officers, teachers and other civil servants."

This false and pernicious "choice" is being offered in the first instance by those who are seeking to destroy both the DIA and workers' pensions. A ruling elite capable of selling off the artistic works that have been accessible to Detroit's population since 1885 to enrich itself will not think twice about stealing everything else from the working class.

It has already taken great strides in that direction, halving the starting pay of auto workers, eliminating thousands of city jobs, privatizing vital services, and, in general, ravaging the city's population. If they are allowed to get away with it, Orr and company will sell off the DIA's works *and* destroy workers' pensions and health benefits.

Those who take as good coin the proposition that Orr and other officials are making genuine efforts to "save" a city in crisis only delude themselves and, intentionally or not, mislead others. The emergency manager is an unelected representative of the banks and asset-strippers, motivated by the goal of imposing the cost of the system's crisis on the backs of the working class.

The threat to the DIA expresses the financial, intellectual and moral exhaustion of capitalist society. A sell-off of the museum's art would open the floodgates to a new wave of social barbarism. The only social force capable of defending the DIA is the same for whom the question of access to culture and knowledge is a life-and-death matter—the working class.