

Sale of art would result in DIA closure

Bryan Dyne
5 September 2013

Graham Beal, the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), made clear in the museum's September news bulletin that if even a single piece of art is sold to satisfy Detroit's creditors, the DIA would be forced to close. Such an action, Beal stated, "would threaten the millage proceeds upon which we now rely to operate" and "would be tantamount to closing the museum."

The DIA has been under threat since May, when Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr asked for an appraisal of the museum's art to determine whether the city could sell off certain works of art in order to appease the city's creditors and pay off portions of Detroit's estimated \$18.5 billion debt. Initial estimates by the *Detroit Free Press* valued the most well-known pieces of art at \$2.5 billion.

Orr has since thrown Detroit into bankruptcy, and is now using this as a pretext for another move against the DIA. Under the guise of "rationalizing" city assets, Orr hired Christie's auction house for \$200,000 to appraise the work at the DIA, and in particular the approximately 3,300 works bought directly by the city. Included in these are masterpieces of van Gogh, Matisse, Rembrandt, Bruegel and others. Regional counties that contribute funding to the DIA have threatened to end their support should any art be sold.

The museum is currently supported by a tri-county millage raised from Wayne County, which contains Detroit, and neighboring Macomb and Oakland counties. On August 20, in response to the hiring of Christie's to appraise the art, the Oakland County Art Institute Authority voted unanimously to terminate its funding to the DIA if any art is sold for any reason other than to purchase more art. Oakland County provides \$9.8 million of the \$23 million collected by the millage and used by the DIA for annual operations. Both Wayne and Macomb counties have since stated that they could repeal their funding if any art is sold.

The threatened closure of the DIA is a continuation of

the 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" that the *World Socialist Web Site* commented on in the lead-up to the millage vote in August 2012. At the time, the WSWS opposed the millage vote not out of indifference to the plight of the DIA, but rather as a principled stance against those spearheading the millage campaign, the various Democratic and Republican officials who pulled the funding from the DIA in the first place.

Those same officials, including Republican Governor Rick Snyder and Democratic Mayor David Bing, have since orchestrated events to bring Kevyn Orr to Detroit and as such are just as responsible for the threats to the DIA as Orr himself.

Other officials, such as Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette have posed as defenders of the DIA since the appraisals of the art began. Schuette recently issued a statement saying that all of the works at the DIA are held in charitable trust of the people and that Michigan law forbids the sale of the art to pay the city's creditors. Yet Schuette is a member of Snyder's cabinet and no doubt had a significant role in drafting the emergency manager law, the implementation of this law through antidemocratic means, and then the selection of Kevyn Orr to send Detroit into bankruptcy.

There have already been indications from Steven Rhodes, the federal judge overseeing Detroit's bankruptcy, that the pensions of city workers—also protected by the state constitution—can be slashed to pay back Detroit's debt. It is the smallest of steps to apply the same principle to art.

In a comment to the *Detroit News*, Beal stated that "I will have to be dismissed before art is taken." Such a stance is a principled defense of art. Yet to stop the looting of the DIA's art into the private collections of billionaires—all in order to pay off Wall Street

banks—will require the mobilization of the region's workers and youth.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact