

Why workers must defend the Detroit Institute of Arts

The Socialist Equality Party
21 September 2013

This statement is being distributed to workers and youth throughout the Detroit area. The SEP and IYSSE are organizing a demonstration on October 4 in front of the DIA on Woodward Avenue in midtown Detroit. For more information and to get involved, visit defendthedia.org.

The Detroit Institute of Arts is under attack. Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, backed by the bankruptcy court, is pricing the great artworks contained in the historic museum. He is threatening to sell them off to satisfy the demands of Wall Street creditors and wealthy art speculators.

If art is to be defended, it is the working class that must come to its defense, and preventing the looting of these treasures is of the highest importance for every worker and young person.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are holding a demonstration on Friday, October 4 to defend the DIA. We call on workers and youth to organize delegations from their factories and workplaces, neighborhoods and schools.

The art at the DIA belongs to the people, not the rich! The museum has one of the few publicly owned art collections in the US. Each year hundreds of thousands of working people, school children and others are enriched by their visits to the 128-year-old museum. It is the cultural center of the city.

The threat to shut it down is no bluff. Orr is a frontman for the banks and hedge funds. They consider everything—from the pensions of city workers and the water and sewerage plant to the animals at the Detroit Zoo and the classic works of European and American artists—as nothing more than “assets” to be seized for profit.

With an estimated 65,000 pieces appraised at \$20

billion or more, the museum’s paintings, statues and other works are seen as the choicest fruit for the picking. As the *Detroit News* noted, comparing the cash value of masterworks to that of zoo animals, “The market value of a snow leopard or zebra falls far short of the millions associated with van Goghs and Renoirs.”

Orr and his political flunkies in Lansing and Detroit say they are considering selling the artwork in order to fund essential services. The maintenance of a world-class museum, they claim, is an unaffordable luxury for a city too poor to light its streets and provide basic services.

This is a contemptible lie. Orr is out to loot the artwork *and* the pensions and vital services of the people of Detroit. The funds obtained from selling off art from the DIA will not go to the people, but to pay off the banks and bondholders.

Predictably, the unions have lined up behind Orr. With the pigheadedness of a typical union bureaucrat, Ed McNeil of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 25, declared that he supported the sell-off of art at the DIA. “You can’t eat art,” he said.

The unions, including AFSCME and the United Auto Workers, have done nothing to defend the jobs, wages or pensions of workers. After decades of selling out the working class, the only concern of McNeil, UAW President Bob King and other union executives is making sure there is a cut for them in the bankruptcy proceedings.

The social rights of the working class are not for sale! Workers cannot give up access to art and culture for themselves and their children in exchange for empty promises of bread and water. The working class has a right to secure and good-paying jobs, education, health

care and a decent retirement—and, just as importantly, a right to culture. It must fight for these rights.

In his remarks at the opening of the modern museum on Woodward Avenue in 1927, DIA Director William Valentiner, a German émigré influenced by the socialist and working class movement, emphasized that the museum was for “all of us Detroiters, rich and poor, high and low.”

It is through exposure to art and culture that human beings become more sensitive, compassionate and aware. Art provides an inspiring sense of what humans, at their best, are capable of achieving, and arouses a renewed confidence in man’s progress and potential. By encouraging a sense of beauty, art trains the viewer to look far more critically at the ugliness of the current state of society and human relations.

The attack on the DIA and culture is not solely about the money that can be confiscated by gutting the institution. The ruling class has repudiated its democratic traditions. The leading figures of the American Revolution and Civil War believed that the only defense against a return of European-style despotism was an enlightened and educated population. Today, there is nothing the despots on Wall Street fear more than a critically minded population.

Well aware of the growth of social opposition resulting from its policies, the ruling class is determined to keep the working class and youth in a state of ignorance so that poverty and subjugation seem to be the natural order of things, not the product of capitalism and the exploitation of one class by another. Not only are the DIA and museums and libraries around the country under attack, funding for art classes in the public schools has been slashed to the bone.

No section of the corporate or political establishment can be relied upon to defend the DIA. While bailing out the Wall Street banks, Obama has refused to bail out Detroit, looking instead to use the “restructuring” of the city as a model for the entire country. The Democrats, from Obama on down to Detroit Mayor Bing and the City Council, are, no less than the Republicans, the pawns of big business.

As for the trade unions, the comments by McNeil expose their attitude not only to the DIA, but to all the rights of the working class. They accept the entire framework of the Detroit bankruptcy and agree that workers must sacrifice their rights to the rapacious

demands of the financial elite.

The claim that pensions can be saved by allowing the bankers and politicians to sell off the art in the DIA is a fraud. The defense of the DIA and the defense of workers’ pensions and jobs are inseparably linked. They are political, not merely economic, questions. There is an irreconcilable conflict between the interests of working people on one side and those of the bankers and super-rich on the other. Those who counsel capitulation on the issue of the DIA will capitulate on everything.

The outcome will be decided in struggle. That is why workers must completely reject the bankruptcy framework, uncompromisingly oppose all demands for “sacrifice,” and mobilize their independent strength against the corporations and their political frontmen.

There are ample resources to rebuild the city, but they are monopolized in the hands of a tiny elite. The new Forbes 400 report shows that the wealthiest 400 individuals in the US possess *more than \$2 trillion*—enough to pay off the deficits of the federal, state and local governments twice over!

The defense of the DIA must become the starting point of a counteroffensive to break the hold of the banks and big business over society. To free up the resources necessary to rebuild Detroit and meet the needs of the city’s population, control of the banks and basic industry must be placed in the hands of the working class. Society must be reorganized to meet social needs, not private profit.

The October 4 demonstration is the beginning of this struggle. Make plans to attend today. Talk to your co-workers and neighbors. Organize a delegation! The art belongs to the people!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact