

“This is our culture”

Chrysler workers voice support for Detroit Institute of Arts

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Auto workers at Chrysler’s truck assembly plant in the Detroit suburb of Warren, Michigan expressed deep support for the arts and anger over the threats by Detroit’s emergency manager to sell off the masterpieces of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed the statement “Why workers must defend the Detroit Institute of Arts” to thousands of workers during the shift change Friday afternoon.

The overwhelming majority took leaflets, with many expressing solidarity with the campaign to mobilize the working class against the looting of the museum and other attacks, including the gutting of city workers’ pensions. The attack is being led by the unelected emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, on behalf of the Wall Street banks and wealthy bondholders.

On Friday, October 4 at 5:30 p.m. the SEP is holding a demonstration at the Woodward Avenue entrance of the DIA. Campaigners urged workers to organize delegations to attend and discussed the importance of the working class to actively defend the right to culture.

Several workers—including young new hires whose wages and conditions in the factories resemble the poverty pay and exploitation that auto workers confronted a century ago—noted how critical art and the DIA was to their lives.

“This is our culture,” Jacques, a recently hired young worker, said. “They are trying to take the few things we have left and sell it off for money. If they take the museum, all the kids will have left is the streets. It’s too dumb them down. One trip to the DIA could save a kid and make him want to create.

“I used to be a worker at the Detroit Institute of Arts in the film theatre. I’m a musician, and my whole

family is made up of poets, musicians and other artists. The museum brings you history. Everybody should be entitled to view the artwork.

“The museum even has the first pages of the Koran, ancient art and as everybody knows, van Gogh. You can’t cheat the people of the city of that. It’s all capitalistic with the corporations and the rich taking everything. I say: ‘Save the Art!’”

Another worker, Debbie, told the WSWs, “I don’t think selling off the art is a good thing. The art belongs to all of us. I go to the DIA all the time. If the DIA closes, where are we going to get art? We will have to pay a fee for some private collection.”

Another young worker, Joshua, added, “Art is a way of expression. It tells us a lot about a culture. It’s history, and it’s for the people. That’s what museums are supposed to be for. That’s why artists get into it—to display their work to the people.

“I’m a sketch artist, and I like to work with oil paints and oil pastels. I’m just getting back into it now. It’s ridiculous how art classes are being cut too. We had classes when I was younger. It was a time we had for ourselves—a time to express ourselves. Now the rich only want to find more ways to get more money. The gap between the rich and the poor is the biggest in decades. There are only a few in the high class, and the lower class is getting bigger and bigger.”

Shawn, a Warren truck worker with 19 years said, “The sale of the art is a bunch of garbage. Aren’t you supposed to preserve art, not sell it? Art bridges the gap between generations. It gives insight into peoples’ lives, their ideas and feelings. If you don’t understand the past, you are doomed to repeat it.”

Jessie, a young worker, said, “I used to be an artist

and a photographer. As a kid I displayed some of my work.” She opposed the sale of the artworks, saying, “I feel like the art is unappreciated. They don’t realize all the hard work the artist puts into these pieces.”

Several workers rejected Orr’s claim that the art museum was an unaffordable luxury and its work should be sold off to pay for pensions and essential services. This lie is being echoed by the trade unions. Workers agreed there was plenty money for art and essential services, with the auto companies making record profits, the stock market booming and the rich doing better than ever.

“I don’t think the city of Detroit should have gone into bankruptcy at all,” said, Dave, a veteran Warren Truck worker. “I think there are other resources they could tap,” referring to the fortunes of Detroit billionaires Mike Illitch and Dan Gilbert.

“I like the DIA, it should remain open. They can’t sell it off. It is not going to solve the problem. All art should be available to the public.”

Another older worker said, “Detroit didn’t have to go bankrupt. They did that to go after the pensions. They want to take us back to slave labor. In the next contract they want to cut our wages by \$6 an hour and take the older workers to the level of the second-tier workers. The United Auto Workers union is doing this,” she said.

She and several other auto workers identified with the Detroit Industry Murals, which Mexican artist and socialist Diego Rivera painted in the central court of the DIA. Completed in March 1933, the twenty-seven panels in the fresco murals depict workers on the assembly line at the Ford Rouge factory. Rivera began the work only one month after Dearborn, Michigan police and Ford’s hired gunmen shot down marching workers demanding jobs during the Hunger March of 1932.

“In the plant we have a copy of the Rivera mural with the faces of current workers covering up the original workers’ faces,” the worker said. “It shows that people do hard work and they should be paid for it. We’ve made progress since the murals were made. Technology has reduced the hard labor, but people can’t live on the wages the young workers are now paid.”

Dave said, “I go down to the DIA and take my daughter. The Detroit Industry murals are one of our favorite pieces. They are awesome. They give people a

sense of Detroit, of the Motor City, and they can look at all that workers build.”

Enza, a worker with 14 years at the plant, said, “I just took a field trip to the DIA with my daughter. What shocked me the most was how much the young people appreciated the art. The pieces are so old and they tell the story of people long ago.

“I think the industrial murals are one of the most spectacular in the museum. I get mixed feelings looking at them. On the one hand it shows how far we’ve come. In the murals you see workers pulling frames down the assembly line. Now we have technology and robots. At the same time it’s a history that speaks for all working class people and what we go through.”

Linton added, “It shows how we evolved over time, from manual labor to robots. By proposing to sell the art it shows that they don’t appreciate good art. They don’t appreciate the labor that we as workers put forth.”

Willie said, “The threat to sell off the art is 100 percent horrible. Art makes us think about life; it’s about freedom.”

Commenting on Rivera’s work, Willie added, “The mural is right to put the working class at the center. We are the backbone. Without us nothing is produced. We are the center of the world.

“Instead society is like a pyramid. The workers are the foundation that holds up the rich at the top. We hold them up. Either we’re going to get respect,” he said, pausing for a moment, “or the foundation is going to drop their asses down. I’m just waiting for that to happen.”



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