

The working class and the Detroit Institute of Arts

Joseph Kishore
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The fight against the sale of artwork at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) is of the highest importance to workers and young people in the Detroit area, throughout the country and internationally.

In the attack on art and the access of the working class to culture, the corporations and banks along with their political representatives reveal, in particularly noxious form, their antagonism to everything of value in the development of human thought and culture. And the great historical tasks of the working class come to the fore in the sharpest fashion in its struggle to defend art and culture.

At stake is the future of one of the most important cultural institutions in the world. An unelected “emergency manager,” Kevyn Orr, has been installed in Detroit with the task of extracting whatever can be extracted from the city to pay off the banks and bondholders. Orr, with the backing of the political establishment, including the Obama administration, has thrown the city into bankruptcy, aiming to use the courts to slash pensions and health care and sell off city assets. A small section of the downtown area is to be “revitalized” on the basis of a plan drawn up by the region’s multi-billionaires.

As part of this process, Orr has hired Christie’s auction house to put a price on the DIA’s artwork. “All options are on the table,” he has insisted, once the accountant’s tally sheet of the cash value of African sculpture, paintings by European impressionists and old masters, Diego Rivera’s famed murals and American landscapes is drawn up. The director of the DIA has said that the sale of any artwork would threaten the museum’s financing and force it to shut its doors.

The possibility that the DIA could be closed or fundamentally transformed, its accessibility to broad masses of people eliminated, is a clear and present

danger. The corporate and financial elite dictating policy in Detroit is thoroughly hostile to the democratic conception that art should be available to the people. This same American ruling class destroyed, in Iraq, museums and archaeological sites of one of the world’s oldest civilizations, as part of a war that led to the deaths of over one million people. And it is the same ruling class that insists that workers must give up their pensions, health care and wages in order to finance the ever-increasing wealth of a tiny portion of US society.

What is happening now in Detroit can only be properly understood in its historical context. The “Motor City” was once the center of American manufacturing. It was at the heart of enormous class battles in the 1930s, led by socialist-minded workers. With the powers that be, frightened by the specter of social upheaval and even revolution, workers won significant concessions. Detroit had the highest per capita income of any American city in the post-war period.

The expansion of the Detroit Institute of Arts took place as part of this process. William Valentiner, an early director of the DIA and a German émigré influenced by socialist ideas, felt strongly that the entire population should have access to the museum. It was Valentiner who commissioned the great industrial murals painted by the Mexican socialist Rivera, which are at the center of the DIA and which place the working class at the center of modern social life.

Over the past four decades, Detroit has suffered relentless decline at the hands of the financial aristocracy. It has been turned into the poorest large city in America, dotted with the empty shells of factories. Public education is being destroyed, libraries shut down and cultural institutions deprived of funds.

A similar process is taking place throughout the

country and worldwide. There is a concerted, quite conscious attempt to turn the clock back on workers' wages and benefits, certainly, but also on their access to culture and knowledge, which always poses a threat to the ruling elite. The aim is to destroy anything that does not contribute directly to profit, to reduce the working class to nothing more than raw material for exploitation.

It is not surprising that the trade unions, which have played the key role in suppressing the class struggle for decades, support the attack on the DIA. One leading union bureaucrat in Detroit summed up the contempt for working people felt by the privileged social layer that control the unions when he defended his hostility to the museum and its works by declaring, "You can't eat art."

The unions welcome the auctioning off of these priceless works not because the resulting funds will save pensions or health care. Indeed, the unions have been collaborating in the attack on pensions and health care for decades. Rather, the union officials hope that at least a small portion of the sale's proceeds will find its way into their own pockets.

Art cannot save itself. The nourishment of art and artists must come from the working class, which emerges as the defender of all that is progressive in human history, and the socialist perspective. The plans of the ruling class can be opposed only through mass struggle against the political prostitutes of the banks and the entire social system that they uphold.

It is on this basis that the SEP has organized a campaign to defend the Detroit Institute of Arts, including a demonstration called for October 4.

There is a broad support for this fight. Polls show 78 percent of the population are opposed to selling off any art. The SEP has encountered widespread support among workers and young people for the DIA, and tremendous anger at the prospect of its destruction. The DIA is "the soul of Detroit," one student said. "This is our culture," declared a young auto worker. There is a broad feeling that art and culture are social rights, no less than jobs and housing, and that an encounter with art can transform lives.

In its campaign to defend the DIA, the SEP is giving voice to these sentiments and providing them with a political perspective. The SEP launched its campaign with the understanding that the radicalization of the

working class must not and will not take place simply around economic issues, but the great questions facing human society in all their aspects. "Socialism is not a bread and butter problem," wrote Rosa Luxemburg, "but a cultural movement, a great and proud world-ideology."

With the ruling class driving society relentlessly backward, it is the working class that must offer a way forward. However, to do so workers must be organized politically, and armed with a conscious understanding that their rights and interests are incompatible with the capitalist system, with the subordination of society to the interests of a tiny corporate and financial elite.

The defense of the DIA is of concern to the population of the entire world. At stake is not only the future of the DIA and Detroit, but all the rights of the working class. We call on workers and young people throughout the country and internationally to support this fight.

Visit defendthedia.org to become involved, endorse the campaign and send in your letter of support.



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