

Detroit area residents speak against sale of DIA art and budget cuts

A WSWWS reporting team
3 October 2013

On Saturday, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality building for the October 4 demonstration opposing the sale of artworks from the Detroit Institute of Arts spoke to workers and young people at Eastern Market in Detroit (see *defendthedia.org*). Many spoke eloquently about the threatened sale of the artworks and the impact of other cuts in social programs in their lives.

Miles and Jack are musicians. They both strongly opposed the threat by Detroit's emergency manager to sell the DIA masterpieces to pay off the city's creditors.

Miles: "My feeling about the DIA is that I've gone there for 15 years, ever since I was a kid. It doesn't make sense to sell one of the cultural staples of Detroit. To sell it off because the city misused money is not going to fix the problems.

Jack: "It does cultivate inspiration and acceptance among people. We have a culture that is based on violence and desensitizing people through the media. Art is so misunderstood nowadays. Art is becoming a commodity.

"You can't take the art. It doesn't belong to anybody. The people who created it didn't make it for us to get ourselves out of economic problems.

"We as a people are so separated. It's like there are people of wealth who make the decisions and leave us to have to forfeit our art. You can't quantify that.

"It's like you are asking to sell my arm, but I don't have a say in it. You can't sell anything in there. You take Diego Rivera's frescoes, they are a part of him. That's who he was.

"The DIA needs to be understood for what it benefits as a culture. And I appreciate that you guys are out here to defend it.'

Ruth Jordan and a friend who both live in Pontiac, Michigan, said they could relate to the experiences workers were going through in Detroit. Pontiac just emerged from under the direction of Emergency Manager Louis Schimmel, who carried out drastic cuts.

"We have no representation", said Ruth. "For example, I had a huge limb that fell in front of my driveway. But, because everything has been privatized, I had no idea who I was supposed to call to see about getting it removed. You don't know who the services are coming from or who provides them.

"I haven't been down to city hall, but I understand it is like a ghost town. They have very few workers now. I think there are 20 workers employed by the city of Pontiac, and there used to be 1,000. "All services have been contracted out through privatization, and all assets have been sold. The golf course has been sold. All of the recreation centers have either been sold or are in the course of being sold. The Salvation Army has taken one of the centers; however, the kids cannot go in there and play.

"The city employees have had their health insurance cut. They are offering them \$400 a month.

"You know they eliminated the fire department. They took a city fire department and merged it with a township, which is smaller. But the township is in control.

"I had a fire station down the street from me, two minutes away. It is now closed.

"Based on information that I have, there are no more than 15 firefighters covering all of Pontiac at any given time.

Ruth's friend said the fire station near her is also closed. "It used to be that a fire truck could make it to any house within four minutes. Now, we share the same fire station and we live on two different sides of town.

There are only three fire stations open at any given time.

“We believe people have died from the lack of fire protection. And with Waterford in control, they don’t know the lay of the neighborhoods like Pontiac residents do.

Daryl Davis, a butcher at Eastern Market, spoke about the threat to sell the artworks from the DIA. “I think it is wrong. They want to take away the things that are needed for the people. What else will there be for us? It’s an education for everyone, young or old. It’s also just good relaxation to go in and see all of the wonderful artwork.

“I like everything about the DIA, the architecture and structure of the building, the whole setup. I like everything about it. It’s a wonderful place.

“The DIA is very educational, but all they are doing is cutting education. My mother was a teacher for over 35 years before she passed away. I’ve seen the way the school system has changed. They are attacking the DIA the same way they are attacking education, and I think it is wrong, totally wrong.

“I’ll be at the demonstration.”

Steve, a retired sanitation worker, spoke about the attacks being carried out by Detroit’s emergency manager on city workers, including plans to slash pensions and privatize city services. “It’s cut-throat, and they are going ahead with the plans to privatize. And since they don’t have a contract, they can do this.

“It’s not a question that they plan to privatize the sanitation department. They have placed the bids out there already. There are a number of companies—Waste Management, Republic—and there was a lady from Canada who wanted the entire city. But nobody wants southwest Detroit.”

“People don’t understand the nature of sanitation. It’s a beast. And southwest Detroit is one of the biggest beasts there is. It is something else. People who work there don’t want to do down there because of all of the toxic wastes.

“We do double duty by doing garbage and snow. We got paid less than most large cities. I don’t think sanitation workers ever made \$18,000 a year, and that’s ridiculous.

“Also, it is not unusual for sanitation workers to work 10, 12, 14 or 16 hours a day. You have to stay until you finish. We would go to work at 7 a.m. and get off at 11

p.m.”

A family from Mount Clemens, Michigan, stopped to speak to WSWS campaigners. They said they opposed the proposal to sell the art at the DIA and told of their experiences with cuts in the local school system.

Their daughter attended Washington Academy, an elementary school that is now closed and was sold to a church. Now, Seminole, the other elementary school in Mount Clemens, only takes students kindergarten through third grade. Grades 4 through 12 go to Mount Clemens High School.

“Now, my 10-year-old is very mature physically, and for her to be in school with high school kids that are not her level—I’m not digging it at all.

“They are in designated sections of the building but they are all in the same building. They don’t even have a playground for kids who are allowed recess.”

When a WSWS reporter asked what the children did during the recess hour, the mother said she thought they did drawings. “No,” replied the young girl. “They stopped us from drawing. We do our homework in the classroom.”

“So, you don’t have a recess?” the reporter asked. “No,” she replied.

When asked about art and music, the mother said, “They cut the art class out at the school. They cut art at Washington Academy two years ago, and they don’t offer it for younger kids at the high school, and they no longer get computer tech.

“My daughter is so bummed about losing art because she is so artistic. She loves to draw. There isn’t a day that goes by without her drawing something.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact