

The working class and the Detroit Industry murals at the DIA

Diego Rivera's "Battle of Detroit"

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3 October 2013

When Diego Rivera arrived in Detroit in April 1932 to create what he was later to consider his greatest work, the *Detroit Industry* murals, he entered an extraordinarily charged political and social environment. Such were the tensions in the city that the painting itself became a major political event. Rivera called the struggle over the murals' production "the Battle of Detroit."

In 1932, Detroit was an industrial colossus laid low by the Great Depression. Auto production had fallen from 5,337,000 units in 1929 to 1,332,000 in 1931, a decline of 75 percent. The annual average wage of workers had plummeted by 54 percent. In the winter of 1932-1933, nearly half of Detroit workers were unemployed and one third of all households, 125,000 in all, were surviving with no cash income. The suicide rate had increased nearly fivefold in the five years from 1927 to 1931. A study of Detroit schoolchildren in 1932 found that nearly one in five were "underweight."

The city's working class had only begun to fight back, a process that would culminate in 1936-1937 with the eruption of strikes and factory occupations led by socialist-minded auto workers, which led to the formation of the mass industrial unions.

Just weeks before Rivera's arrival in Detroit, on the bitter cold day of March 7, 1932, the Detroit Unemployed Council led a march of about 5,000 workers and youth from Detroit to Ford's massive River Rouge factory system in Dearborn in what became known as "The Hunger March." The workers, going forward against a howling wind under banners such as "Tax the Rich and Feed the Poor," "Give Us Work," and "We Want Bread Not Crumbs," aimed to present 14 demands to Henry Ford, the world's richest man, including calls for the hiring of the unemployed, the right to organize in unions, no discrimination against blacks in hiring, and an end to the hated company spy system.

When the marchers reached Dearborn, police and Ford's private goons attacked with tear gas, fire hoses, clubs, and live fire. Four members of the Communist Youth League were killed: Joe York, Coleman Leny, Joe DeBlasio, and Joe Bussell, just 16 years old. Twenty-two more were wounded, among them Curtis Williams, who died from his injuries three months later. The *New York Times* reported on the scene's aftermath: "Dearborn streets were stained with blood, streets were littered with broken glass and the wreckage of bullet-riddled automobiles, and nearly every window in the Ford plant's employment building had been broken."

In an astonishing display of solidarity, on March 12, as many as 60,000 workers marched down Woodward Avenue past the Detroit Institute of Arts and six miles west to Woodmere Cemetery where the four workers killed on March 7 were to be buried. Mourners were forbidden from entering Dearborn, where they would be met "first with stocks, then tear gas, then stench gas, and finally with guns if the

other means fail," threatened Fred Faustman, acting chief of Dearborn police.

There was no religious service, press reports complained; instead, workers sang the *Internationale*—the anthem of international working class solidarity. Because Curtis Williams was African American, Woodmere cemetery refused to allow his remains to be interred there; his ashes were instead scattered from an airplane over the River Rouge plant.

Rivera came to Detroit within weeks of the Hunger March, on April, 21, 1932, already a famous artist and the subject of bitter attacks from both the right wing and the Stalinist Communist parties of the US and Mexico. Rivera had been expelled from the Communist Party of Mexico in 1929 for ideological "deviation," and had been pegged as a "Trotskyite," the greatest of political sins. The Stalinists labeled Rivera a "millionaire artist for the establishment" and a "false revolutionary." He arrived in Detroit from California, where he had recently completed *Allegory of California* at the San Francisco Stock Exchange.

Rivera was to be paid \$21,000, entirely out of the pocket of Edsel Ford. An amateur artist and trustee of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Edsel was certainly more progressive-minded than his father, Henry. The elder Ford had become a virulent anti-Semite, responsible for the first publication of *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the US. Henry Ford was a bitter anti-communist and opposed to any independent organization of the working class in his plants, using his notorious "Service Department" to spy on, intimidate, and beat workers who stepped out of line.

Ford workers later testified about a reign of terror in the company town of Dearborn. Homes were broken into and searched without warrants, city officials threatened violence against workers' committees and denied workers the right to assemble, while unemployed workers applying for welfare relief were denied. In one case, an official from the city's "Safety Commission" stuck a gun in the face of one workers' leader and told him, "We put four of your kind in their graves with this and we'll put a lot more if we have to."

The DIA's brilliant director, Wilhelm Valentiner, a German émigré profoundly influenced by the socialist movement, had commissioned Rivera to do a set of murals in the central Garden Court of the museum based on the theme of "The Spirit of Detroit."

The muralist believed this spirit was to be found in the factories. "Over the next three months, Rivera proceeded to race from factory to factory across the greater Detroit area," according to historian Alex Goodall. "He visited dozens of locations around the city, but his chief inspiration came from the Ford Company's River Rouge plant: the largest mechanized site of communal industrial activity in the world."

The plant was a massive conglomeration of productive capacity and

power, taking up the space of a small city, in which raw materials such as coal, wood and iron ore were brought in by ships and railroad, and were worked up in steel mills, foundries and factories operated by as many as 100,000 workers. Iron ore that arrived by boat would emerge as a finished motor on the assembly line 33 hours later.

When he finally began work on the murals on July 25, 1932, giving himself and his assistants a schedule of 18-hour shifts “as demanding a schedule as any speedup set by Ford’s plant managers,” in Goodall’s words, “the murals proved to be socially incandescent.”

In an unpublished manuscript, Valentiner described them as “a sort of encyclopedia of the scientific and mechanical knowledge of his era, beginning with the human being’s development from an embryo.” Man’s activities, he continued, are “are shown spreading out like the roots of a tree” from the development of agriculture, to the discovery of natural resources and the invention of technological methods of the peoples of the world for making use of coal, iron, lime and sand, the basis of modern industry.

At the center of his work, Rivera placed the industrial working class, portrayed not as a gray mass but an immense, living, social power, whose collective labor puts into motion all of mankind’s historic achievements.

Opposition to Rivera’s murals was concentrated in Detroit’s upper classes. “Senor Rivera has perpetrated a heartless hoax on his capitalist employer, Edsel Ford,” said Marygrove College president George Derry, “[H]e has foisted on Mr. Ford and the museum a Communist Manifesto.” For his part, Rivera later recalled “[b]eautiful, well-dressed ladies complain[ing] about the loss of their peaceful, lovely garden, which had been like an oasis in the industrial desert of Detroit.”

In their attacks, the critics revealed their narrowness. The *Detroit Free Press* howled over the fact that both Rivera and DIA director William [Wilhelm] Valentiner were not American. “An art director is brought in from Germany to commission a Mexican artist to interpret the spirit of an American city,” it wrote. “Why not hire a French director to find us a Japanese muralist to tell us what he thinks we look like.” The *Detroit News* called the murals “un-American, incongruous and unsympathetic” and proposed “to whitewash the entire work.”

The most bitter denunciations came from the fascistic Detroit-based “radio priest,” Father Charles Coughlin, whose syndicated radio program reached millions of American homes, and Rev. H. Ralph Higgins of Detroit’s St. Paul’s Methodist church, both of whom sought the murals’ destruction.

“Father Coughlin began to honor me daily with long diatribes, condemning the Institute frescoes as immoral, blasphemous, anti-religious, obscene, materialistic, and communistic,” Rivera remembered. “As a result, the whole city of Detroit began to argue about what I was doing.”

“[T]hese murals are about as appropriate to the classical court of our art museum as a jazz band in a medieval cathedral,” fulminated Higgins. “[T]he murals presume to typify the spirit of Detroit. If the genius of our people be unmixed materialism and atheism, if our gods be science and sex, if the brutality of the machine age is the sole virtue which our fair city expresses, if these things be true, Mr. Rivera should be hailed as a modern Michael Angelo [sic].”

The threat against the murals was not idle. Later, in 1934, Rivera was compelled to stop work on his mural *Man at the Crossroads* at the Rockefeller Center in New York City. Sponsor Nelson Rockefeller objected to the inclusion of an image of Lenin in the painting. The

entire Rockefeller Center mural was destroyed and lost forever in March 1934.

In Detroit, Rivera won the support of prominent intellectuals and artists. Famed architect Albert Kahn, in defending Rivera, turned the tables on the murals’ religious critics. “There is nothing new in these attacks by churchmen. Michelangelo portrayed as devils the churchmen who tried to interfere with him when he was doing the Sistine Chapel,” Kahn said. “Rembrandt was just as guilty of the charges of sacrilege as Rivera. But who throws stones at Rembrandt today?”

But the most powerful defense of Rivera and his work came from the working class. As many as 100,000 visitors came to visit the mural in its first month after opening, March 1933, one year after the Hunger March. Before the murals, the DIA had seen its budget fall by 1932 to one tenth of its 1929 level. Valentiner recalled, “There was talk at City Hall of closing the museum, even of selling its art objects. Thus, the entire effort of ten years to build up a remarkable public collection with limited means seemed to be in jeopardy. Worse still was the problem of the staff, to whom the city could pay no salaries.”

The smashing success of Rivera’s mural bolstered the museum. The year 1934 saw the highest attendance in DIA history to that point.

In his autobiography, Rivera expressed gratitude for the enthusiastic response from industrial workers, who, he said, felt the murals “had been created exclusively for the pleasure of the workers of this city.”

Rivera said he came to the United States from Mexico to assess “the action and reaction between my painting and the great masses of industrial workers.” His murals, he believed, could never be the focus of the private contemplation of the privileged few. They would instead inspire and become an active agent in the revolutionary transformation of society. In this Rivera continues to be proven correct.



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