

Detroit emergency manager escalates threats against DIA art

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At a Thursday talk at a Detroit Economic Club luncheon, Detroit's Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr ramped up threats to sell off the art at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Asked by the moderator at the Detroit Economic Club event if plans were still going forward to sell off the DIA's priceless collection Orr replied, "Everything is on the table. I have a fiduciary responsibility to account for all of the assets of the city of Detroit and foremost among them might be the DIA."

He continued by issuing an ultimatum to the staff of the DIA to make a proposal for the sale of the collection "that makes sense not just for the city but for the creditors." If not, Orr warned "I have an obligation to come up with a solution." He said Christie's would finish its appraisal of "tier one" art by the end of October and "tier 2" art by the end of November.

Orr said that 35,000 out of the city's 66,000 piece collection are "free and clear" for appraisal and possible sale.

In August Orr hired Christie's auction house to begin appraising the DIA's collection. The world famous museum holds important masterworks, including Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry Murals as well as paintings by van Gogh and Matisse, 66,000 pieces in all. The appraisal is in preparation for a possible sale of the art to pay off Detroit's creditors. It follows the bankruptcy filing by the city in July, the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history.

Orr, appointed in March by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder to the post of emergency manager over Detroit, is using his dictatorial powers to rip up union contracts, privatize services and sell off city assets.

Orr cynically attempted to counterpose the pensions and health benefits of retired city workers to the defense of the DIA art collection. "Think of this," he

declared, "I've got to rationalize pensions and healthcare ... there may be your fellow citizens who have to eat cat food and I've got this great collection over here but can't touch it."

The claim that pensions can be saved by sacrificing art is a fraud. In fact the banks and wealthy creditors of Detroit are demanding that both pensions and art be looted in the name of their profits.

Orr's comments come only a week after his office released a proposal to end the current pension program for city workers, transferring current and former workers onto a 401(k)-type investment scheme, which will shift an enormous financial burden onto the workers. Many city workers will see their pension accumulations wiped out. Orr has also proposed eliminating the retiree health care program, replacing it with a subsidy for the purchase of private insurance on the Obama administration's health care exchanges.

The suggestion that the sell-off of art would be used for pensions was belied by Orr himself when he said, "We have an obligation to our creditors, who are owed a great deal of money..." In other words, the proceedings from the sale of art would be handed over to the banks and bondholders.

Asked again directly what he would say to people who were protesting the sale of the DIA art and pension cuts Orr reiterated his position, "We can't do the status quo. That is contrary to the position I have and what the city needs."

In a revealing moment Orr referred to his own left inclinations as a student at the University of Michigan, saying that he even considered himself at the time "somewhat of a socialist." He wanted "to stick it to the man" Orr quipped, but now "I am the man," he said evoking laughter and applause from the assembled corporate executives.

All sections of the ruling establishment, conservative as well as so-called liberal, are united in their determination that the working class must pay for the bankruptcy of Detroit through the destruction of education and pensions as well as access to art and culture. This was underscored again last week with the visit of high-level Obama administration officials to Detroit to consult on the bankruptcy. The officials made clear that they were behind the massive cuts being carried out and that there would be no federal bailout of the city.

The only force that can defend culture as well as pensions and healthcare is the working class. The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality have called for a demonstration to be held today, October 4, at 5:30 pm at the Woodward Avenue entrance to the Detroit Institute of Arts. We urge all those interested in the defense of art and culture to attend. For more information, visits defendthedia.org .



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