

Workers and young people at demonstration speak out in defense of the DIA

Tim Rivers
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At the rally organized by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to defend the Detroit Institute of Arts, workers and young people spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about why they had come to the demonstration. See “Hundreds rally to oppose sale of art at the Detroit Institute of Arts”).

Hundreds came to voice their outrage at the attack on the cultural heritage contained in the DIA, and their determination to turn back the assault on jobs, pensions, health care and education. Many commented on the power of the demonstration, its unity of purpose, youthful optimism and determination to defend their precious art museum.

Residents of the city and the region, as well as visitors from Europe and Asia, spoke passionately about the DIA. The art belongs to the people, not the rich, was the overwhelming sentiment. Many commented on the seriousness of the marchers and the issues they were confronting.

Jesica Versichele, a Wayne State art history major said, “The DIA is an educational facility for students of all ages. The value of the DIA goes beyond the worth you can put on an individual piece of art. The museum is where we come to learn about the past and where we came from. This is a gem that can’t be replaced by anything.”

Jesica was particularly moved by the special role of the DIA within the broader cultural framework of American museums. Pointing to the sign she had made, she said, “This van Gogh self-portrait is the first painting by the artist to be owned by a museum in the United States. It is one of the most important paintings in the collection” and is a special target of art speculators, and thus of their agent, Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr. But she said van Gogh was the

opposite of a capitalist himself. “He did not work for money and only sold a single painting.

“A reasonable institution like another museum will never buy the DIA art because that would reflect badly on them. This is the pillaging of art right now. The very rich, the top one percent, would be the only recipients of this art.

“They are taking art away from the people to whom it belongs and putting it into the hands of people who already have everything.

“Artists like Caravaggio and Rubens do not come on the art market. How can you put a dollar value on their works? These are meant to be enjoyed by the people of Detroit.

“They are trying consciously to keep education away from the next generation. University education is so expensive, and they are cutting funding for public schools. We are fighting for the art because it gives young people a point of reference from which to fight for their future.”

WSWS reporters did not have to ask for interviews. The air was electric. A worker approached this reporter asking angrily, “What kind of morally bankrupt person would sell years of culture to pay a bill?” Kevin Rakestraw is retired and a sketching and watercolor artist and musician. “That is like a Viking—loot and pillage and move on to the next one.

“Sell the art today,” he said with disgust. “What’s next ... until there is nothing left to sell.” Kevin grew up in Detroit and expressed the frustration and anger of the overwhelming majority of the population with the bankruptcy and the emergency manager.

“He [Orr] is a hired gun for whoever has the biggest checkbook. He hired his own law firm for \$19 million and growing.”

Richard is a city worker in the water department.

“They are robbing us. Our jobs should be thirty years and out with a good retirement. They are trying to do away with that. They are ripping me and shaking me upside down. I live in this city. I was born in Detroit. You might say that some of the art in here belongs to me.

“Orr is just a front man for the people who run the World Bank. They are the ones who are out to get us.

“I am ready to strike. Somebody has to stand up and say, ‘This has to change now!’ You can forget the unions. They have been bought off long ago. Money rules them.”

Sanja Srdanov is a high school art teacher from Windsor, Ontario. She said, “I just stopped by when they started congregating. I said, ‘I need to stop and support it.’ I bring my students here once a year. We get US television so we are briefed on what is happening.

“The first thing I did when I heard about the threat to the museum was put up a post on my Facebook page to save the DIA. It is one of the top 5- 6 art museums in the US. I lived abroad in Italy, you live and breathe culture there. But to take it away here?”

“We have had cuts to our art gallery in Windsor. We have a huge collection of Canadian art. So as an art teacher where are you going to take your students? When my students came here they were floored by the architecture of the building as well as the art.”

She spoke about the attacks taking place on teachers in Canada. “We lost our right to strike as teachers last year, so we went on a work-to-rule. We have issues over pay and workload. I have a friend who teaches in Detroit. We are astounded at the (low) pay rates of teachers here. But now Canada is going through the same crisis as the US.”

Henrietta Moore is a retired school administrator. She said, “It’s appalling. I don’t believe they need to sell the art even if there is a deficit. Once it is gone, it is gone; and it will never come back.

“I grew up in Detroit. We went here on school field trips. It is one of the jewels of the city. It would be unimaginable if it were sold. It belongs to the people of Detroit, all the people worldwide. I have seen people from all over the world come here when they visit Detroit.”

Catherine Milewski studies art history at Wayne State University and volunteers at the DIA. She attended the

rally with Kelsey Sullivan who studies illustration at the College for Creative Studies. “The DIA has always been one of my favorite places in the world, and I want to work here in the future. I used to come here for birthdays all the time.

“Kids really enjoy coming here.” She spoke passionately about the importance of art to society as a whole. “Every period in art history is shaped by the events of the time. You can really learn about history through art. That is why the museum is so important.”

By contrast, she said, “The rich people do not want to keep this open—the one percent—because the growth of communism is happening all over again, the same as it did in the early twentieth century.”

Kelsey added, “I do not think selling the art from the DIA is going to move Detroit forward. It would be really terrible to take the art away from the city and the surrounding area.”

The World Socialist Web Site will publish more interviews from the DIA rally in the coming days.



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