

The significance of the rally to defend the Detroit Institute of Arts

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The demonstration Friday to oppose the sale of art from the Detroit Institute of Arts was a significant, even historic milestone in the development of the workers movement, with national and international significance.

The rally, organized and held under the banner of the Trotskyist Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, was the first organized political expression of opposition to the bankruptcy of Detroit and the policies of Detroit's Emergency Manager, Kevyn Orr. Approximately 500 workers and youth—that is, a significant cross section of the Detroit working class, including students, city workers, teachers, retirees, artists, and tenants fighting eviction—gathered to denounce the attack on culture and all the rights of the working class.

The demonstration was infused with enthusiasm and optimism. After decades of betrayals and the suppression by the corporate-controlled trade unions of all forms of opposition to attacks on the working class, this rally provided many of the participants with their first opportunity to engage in social protest. Demonstrators cheered the speakers who attacked the Democrats and Republicans, denounced the capitalist profit system, emphasized the need for socialism and appealed for international working class solidarity.

The size of the demonstration was significant, a fact acknowledged even by the local media. Until Friday, the bankruptcy of Detroit and the actions of the emergency manager have proceeded without any active resistance. The financial vandals, for whom Orr is a spokesman, have had a free hand to rip up pensions and health care and liquidate city assets. Just last week, Orr said that he considers much of the DIA art to be “free and clear” for appraisal by Christie's auction house in preparation for its sale to pay off the city's

bondholders.

The imposition of the emergency manager has the support of the entire political establishment, Democratic and Republican. Orr was appointed and given dictatorial powers over the future of Detroit by Michigan's Republican Governor Rick Snyder and Democratic Treasurer Andy Dillon. The City Council and Mayor, and the entire corrupt local government, acquiesced immediately, giving up their own powers without protest, so long as their own perks and privileges were maintained.

Orr has also received the backing of the Obama administration, which sees what is happening in Detroit as a model for similar measures throughout the country. Administration officials were in the city only a week ago to give their blessing to the proceedings. The token funds made available are largely in the form of cash to the ruling class of Detroit to assist in the destruction of buildings and the hiring of more police.

The trade unions are actively supporting and participating in this reactionary process. Running the organizations as moneymaking businesses that profit from the exploitation of the working class, the union executives share the outlook and interests of corporate America. The contempt that these organizations have for the workers they claim to represent was summed up by a comment from the local head of the government workers union, who justified the sale of DIA art with the claim that you “can't eat art.” The only concern of the union executives is that some of the proceeds from the sale of DIA masterpieces wind up in their own pockets.

Political opponents of the Socialist Equality Party among the myriad middle-class protest organizations habitually denounce our organization as “sectarian.” What they really mean is that the SEP strives to

organize the working class in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions and the Democratic Party, and on the basis of an international socialist program. Friday's rally provided an eloquent refutation of the slander. Not only has the SEP proved itself to be the only organization capable of organizing the working class in defense of its interests. The rally also expressed, if only in an early form, the intersection of the objective movement of the working class and the struggle for Marxist principles and the fight for socialist consciousness.

One further point must be made about the role played by the Socialist Equality Party in the defense of the Detroit Institute of Arts. Why, some have asked us, has the SEP concerned itself with the fate of an "elite" institution? What has the fate of paintings and art in general to do with the "bread and butter" issues that are, supposedly, the main interests of the working class? These questions, however sincere and well-intentioned, reflect an underestimation of the role of the working class as the essential revolutionary-progressive force in contemporary capitalist society and an inadequate understanding of the significance of the struggle for socialism. Can anyone doubt that a working class, conscious of the critical importance of art and culture, will prove no less capable of waging a determined struggle for wages, health care and pensions?

The International Committee and the WSWS have long insisted that culture is necessary for the working class and that the struggle of the working class for socialism is necessary for culture. Art cannot save itself. The whole progressive heritage of mankind, including its cultural heritage, depends upon the intervention of the working class in opposition to the plunder being carried out by the modern-day aristocracy.

The SEP understands very well that this one demonstration, in a single city, has not solved the complex political problems that confront the American working class. The demonstration consisted of hundreds of protesters, not thousands. But all those who are familiar with the political environment of the United States—the monopolization of official political life by the capitalist two party system, the relentless anticommunism of the media and its suppression of dissenting opinion, the non-stop glorification of

militarism and every conceivable form of political and cultural backwardness, the stultifying promotion of middle-class identity and life-style politics, and the systematic denial of the very existence of an American working class—will recognize that the October 4 march in defense of the DIA was an immensely significant and even historic event. In Detroit, a historic center of the American and international class struggle, hundreds of workers and youth marched with socialist banners and placards in opposition to the policies of the capitalist class.

The decades-long exclusion of the working class from political life and social struggle is beginning to break apart. The demonstration is a major anticipation of the political radicalization of the American working class. The development of this radicalization, which will acquire an increasingly distinct anticapitalist and socialist character, will not only dramatically transform political life in the United States. The emergence of the American working class as a revolutionary force will reverberate throughout the world.

All those who agree with the program of the Socialist Equality Party and want to play an active part in the fight for socialism should make the decision to join this movement.



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