

“Without the DIA we would not know anything about culture”

Workers and students speak out in defense of the DIA

WSWS reporters
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We are publishing more interviews from some of the hundreds of workers and young people who attended last Friday's mass demonstration in front of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) in midtown Detroit. The Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality organized the rally as part of a fight to build a movement in the working class to defend culture and all social rights.

Sharon Simmons studies illustration at the College for Creative Studies. She said, “All my field trips from high school came here. Without the DIA we would not know anything about culture. I feel it should stay here and we should not sell the art. That is the heart of the city.

“It should not be sold to somebody just because they have a lot of money. It should be here for everybody to see. As a student you come here for inspiration. Everybody comes here. This is where you can be encouraged to think that you can actually do this.

“I keep thinking about the inscription over the doors. ‘Dedicated by the People of Detroit to the Knowledge and Enjoyment of Art.’ I believe in that.”

Amy Schmidt from Livonia is a student at WSU in physics and forensic pathology. “This demonstration is awesome!” she said. “That makes me very happy. I enjoy seeing all these kids here. It teaches them the value that people have. They have to let their voice be heard on government issues and social issues.

“This is the first time we have done anything like this.

“The museum is so important. For people from Wayne County, we do not even have to pay to go in. They do not see the damage this may cause to the city. Pretty soon we are not going to have anything.

Now because of the cuts in funding, they charge a crazy amount to take your kids into the Science Center. I do not mind paying to go. It is important. But many people cannot afford it.

“This [selling art from the DIA] is not the solution. What are our kids going to look at? The internet is not safe. The internet is not the same as the museum. Sure they can have a digital reproduction of art. But that is ridiculous to think you can replace a great museum with the internet.”

Saulius Simoliunas is president of the department of chemists at the Detroit Water and Sewage Department. He came to the demonstration to support the struggle to defend the museum and at the same time to speak on behalf of city workers. “Our position is that the debts of the city were incurred without our knowledge. Our pensions and salaries are contractual obligations which they cannot touch.

“The art belongs to the people. It should never be sold.

“The citizens are made to pay for an expensive project for [billionaire Mike] Illitch.” 250 million dollars from the city treasury has been ear-marked to construct a new ice arena for the Detroit Redwings hockey team which is owned by Illitch who is also the owner of the Little Caesars Pizza chain.

“The various amusement parks were paid for with public bonds which pay interest to the banks. Now that the bonds are not paying so well, they want us to give up everything we have to pay off the bonds. They did not invest wisely the money from the workers' pension fund. That is why I am here, to advance the struggle of the working class.

“What is the difference between the two parties

[Democrats and Republicans]? I am a socialist.

This demonstration is perfect. The young people came to demonstrate about the art and about the rights of the workers.”

Haomin Wei, a student from Yunnan, China, at College for Creative Studies heard about the demonstration on Facebook. Asked why he had come, he said, “It is the DIA. It has art which is priceless. It is about culture.”

Having grown up in difficult, working-class circumstances in China had made him sensitive to the importance of art and culture. “I am serious about culture,” he said. “You know that Mao destroyed culture in my country. It [the attack on the DIA] is against humanism. The government is creating misery. It is crazy.

“I am a socialist because I come from a poor background and my father had to work very hard to send me here. Because I grew up poor, I have sympathy for the working class. The capitalists care only about the rich. But most of the world population is poor people.”

Ryan Doyle, a Detroit kinetic artist said, “When I first heard about the sale of the DIA art I think I started crying. It’s a pretty horrible situation. I am here to support the art.

“The emergency manager has been hinting at it for a while. I came down here with a 60-foot dragon and lit it on fire to spread the word.”

Keenan, who has been a metal artist since he was six years old, said, “I came because the DIA is priceless in reality. They can appraise its cash value as a trillion dollars if they want. The people would not sell it. To sell it would undercut the value of everything we have, everything we do.

“[Multi-billionaires] Dan Gilbert and Mike Illitch own everything in the downtown and they split the proceeds. That is what is wrong with Detroit.

“It would not affect their bank account at all to pay off the city debt. It shows you they are lying [about claims there is no money]. It is a scheme to get more money.”

Dustin, Daniel, Lidiya are students at the College for Creative Studies. Daniel said, “I thought [the rally] was really cool. I did not expect so many to show up. Also the composition of the crowd was good. People brought their kids. There were students, working people.

Everybody was here.”

Lidiya added, “Without the DIA, our city is really going to be dead. I am from Russia. I remember coming here for the first time. The art institute was why we came to Detroit. Many people from around the world come to see it.”

Dustin commented, “This [selling the art] is so wrong in all ways. I am speaking from an artist’s point of view. Take Diego Rivera, for example. He worked harder and longer and did more work than any of those corporate bankers who are complaining about their pay check. The range of people who can afford to purchase artworks like these is so small. This is going against what the artists themselves would want.”



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