

Union-backed mayoral candidate proposes selloff of DIA artwork

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Union-backed Detroit mayoral candidate Benny Napoleon has come out in favor of selling artwork at the Detroit Institute of Arts, a sentiment shared by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr. In remarks made Tuesday, he counterposed the DIA's priceless collection to maintaining the city's police force.

Napoleon declared at an election event on Wednesday, "I will not jeopardize the public safety of this city—of the people in the neighborhoods—by laying off one police officer in order to preserve the art collection at the DIA.

"While I value the art collection as a cultural and educational institution in this city and region," he continued, "our number one priority as a city is to ensure the health, safety and well-being of citizens first and foremost. If [city retirees'] pensions are on the table for a possible reduction, then the art held by the DIA should be on the table as well."

Napoleon's comments reflect the law-and-order program of the former police chief and current sheriff of Wayne County. His primary answer to the social crisis in the city is to hire more police officers. Since the beginning of his mayoral campaign, one of Napoleon's primary platform points has been to flood the city with one police officer for each of the city's 137 square miles.

The claim, moreover, that art should be counterposed to pensions is a fraud, one that has been repeated by Orr and union officials. In fact, under the direction of the emergency manager, and with the complicity of the entire political establishment, all the rights of the working class are under attack—the rights to culture, pensions, health care and jobs.

Napoleon has made no statement opposing Orr for eliminating retiree health care benefits for Detroit's nearly 20,000 retired employees. Nor has he come out

against the various plans put forward by the emergency manager to privatize city services.

Nearly all of the trade unions in Detroit have endorsed Napoleon's campaign. The unions, and the section of the Democratic Party with which they are allied, have said that the DIA must be counterposed to maintaining living standards in Detroit. "You can't eat art," said Ed McNeil, special assistant to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 25.

This position accepts the entire framework of the emergency manager and the bankruptcy of Detroit, namely that there are no resources for both pensions and culture, that one or the other must go, and that the working class must pay for the decades of deindustrialization, five years of an economic crisis and massive tax cuts for the rich. These are also the same unions that have presided over constant cuts to pensions, wages and benefits of city workers and retirees over the past decade.

The unions agree that the assets of the city should be "monetized" in order to bail out the city's bondholders. McNeil, whose salary is \$143,000, is seeking to ensure that the bankruptcy proceedings preserve the dues base of the unions and thus the pay of the top executives.

Bob King, president of the UAW, has repeatedly stated that Detroit should use the Obama administration's restructuring of the auto industry as a model, where the unions built "collaborative relationships" with management. In doing so, they played a key role in suppressing any resistance by the working class to the slashing of jobs and wages.

"The Detroit branch of the AFSCME," said King in an August interview with *In These Times*, "drafted and proposed a \$180 million savings package." In other words, AFSCME proposed to cut worker wages and

benefits by that amount. “That union met with the UAW about this, and we agreed that the unions should collaborate with the city and try to make these savings happen.”

For his part, Napoleon’s opponent Mike Duggan has come out against the selloff of the DIA’s masterpieces. This statement, however, is entirely for show. Duggan has the support of dominant sections of the corporate and political establishment in Detroit and fully supports the “restructuring” of the city in the interests of the rich, a restructuring that includes slashing pensions and health care and cutting off the access of the working class to the cultural heritage of the city.



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