

David Walsh delivers lecture “Art, Socialism, and the Working Class” at Toronto’s York University

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David Walsh, arts editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, spoke to an audience of students, workers, and faculty at York University in Toronto on October 24. The event was organized by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Critical Geography Reading Group at York.

Entitled “Art, Socialism, and the Working Class,” the lecture outlined the relationship between the three phenomena, and emphasized that the defence of humanity’s artistic achievements is a fundamental component in the fight for socialism.

Walsh began by discussing the Socialist Equality Party’s campaign in defense of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), a “concrete expression” of the party’s attitude toward art and culture. The speaker described the advanced stage of the attack on art and culture in the United States. In Detroit, ravaged by decades of corporate de-industrialization facilitated by the political parties of big business and their trade union accomplices, the working class is being stripped of its right to access art and culture, and being made to pay for the failure of capitalism.

The campaign to defend the DIA, Walsh continued, was launched by the SEP as part of its drive to unite the working class in opposition to the Detroit bankruptcy and capitalism the world over. The SEP contends that the defence of art and culture, including the breathtaking murals painted at the DIA by Mexican artist Diego Rivera, is dependent on the development of socialist consciousness within the working class.

Workers and artists in Detroit and across the United States and internationally responded strongly to the campaign in defense of the DIA. Many expressions of support poured in. Hundreds of workers, young people

and retirees joined a demonstration outside the DIA on October 4. The protest was the largest expression to date of political opposition to the impending bankruptcy of Detroit, and marked an important milestone in the development of the socialist movement.

Walsh pointed to the crucial role that art had played in shaping the consciousness of the working class in preparation for revolutionary struggles, including the October Revolution of 1917. The best artists had created, through varied forms, vivid images of life, full of dynamic movement and elements of the best and worst in the human condition. Helping to inspire outrage at existing injustices and a desire to fundamentally transform society, these works prepared important layers of the population to fight for the cause of human liberation.

While pointing to the weaknesses of contemporary culture, rooted in objective problems of social development, Walsh suggested that the greatest artistic achievements were yet to come. Social turbulence would play a significant role in improving the cultural climate.

The WSWS arts editor pointed to the trend in academic “left” circles to denigrate humanity’s greatest artistic treasures as mere ideological tools of the ruling class. This demoralized outlook, an appendage of post-structuralist and post-modernist schools of thought, expressed a hostile attitude of the petty bourgeoisie toward humanity’s cultural accomplishments and potential. The traumas and challenges of the 20th century had largely overwhelmed these “left” types. They continue to rely on the tired, false trope that it is impossible to cognize

objective reality in art or thought generally.

As Walsh pointed out, this is an absurd falsehood, repudiated by the lasting truths that artists have passed down through the ages, and which we continue to hold dear. The task that falls to the socialist movement is the defence of these past achievements, as well as the artistic and cultural education of the working class. The speaker ended his address by encouraging all those in attendance to undertake this struggle and join the Socialist Equality Party.

An engaging and wide-ranging discussion followed the lecture.

One member of the audience asked about the parallels between the rejection of art's capacity for objective cognition, and the theories of "proletarian culture" and "socialist realism" fabricated by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Walsh explained, first of all, that Soviet artists in the 1930s and 1940s were forced to conform to this anti-Marxist ideology on pain of imprisonment or execution. The idea that all past culture should be rejected on the basis of its non-proletarian origins was patently absurd. If that were the case, groundbreaking achievements in science and philosophy, including Marxism itself, would have to be dismissed as irrelevant as well. The indisputable genius of literary figures like Tolstoy and Pushkin, among others, was to be found in their capacity to be truthful, in spite of their political and social limitations. Marxism situated itself firmly upon the foundations of humanity's highest cultural achievements.

A law student raised the issue of new file sharing technologies, and the restraints imposed by copyright laws and intellectual property forms.

These new technologies, Walsh answered, called implicitly for the universal distribution of artistic and cultural material, and the abolition of private property. Under socialism, society would find ways of meeting the artist's economic needs. The artist's own pursuits, unfettered by the constraints and demands of the market, would reach new heights of the sublime.

A geography student inquired into the social conditions that both produced and shaped the careers of filmmakers like Steven Spielberg.

Walsh answered that, though a talented and sensitive filmmaker, Spielberg was fundamentally a product of his times, and was by no means alone in his limitations.

Exposed to the stagnant environment of American society over the past several decades, Spielberg and his compatriots had relatively little social material to work with.

As a whole, Walsh reiterated, the quality of American filmmaking had regressed considerably since its height in the 1930s and 40s. However, the social tensions of the current historical period, teetering on a knife's edge, are poised to furnish the material for an artistic renaissance across the world.



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