

As unions push sale of art treasures

Detroit workers defend DIA

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In preparation for the February 15 Workers Inquiry into the Attack on the DIA and the Bankruptcy of Detroit, members of the Socialist Equality Party spoke to workers and students who were visiting the Detroit Institute of Art (DIA) last Friday night.

Many were angered by news of the legal action launched last week by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in collusion with several banks and bond insurance companies. The joint motion filed in the bankruptcy court demands the sale of the priceless artworks of the DIA to maximize payments to the creditors holding the city's debts. (See "Detroit union joins legal action to force sell-off of DIA art").

In the face of popular opposition to the attack on the DIA—with 78 percent of poll respondents saying they are against any sale of the artwork—the unions have claimed that money extracted from the DIA will go to pay pension benefits owed to more than 23,000 retired workers. This is a lie. The unions are allied with big bondholders and banks, which are determined to rob the artwork and destroy pensions in order to extract every penny possible from the working class in Detroit.

The unions' attempt to present the issue as pensions vs. art has been calculated to confuse workers and defuse overwhelming public opposition. By insinuating that workers have no need or interest in fine art, however, the union apparatus is seeking to attribute to the working class its own backwardness and hostility to culture.

Municipal workers who spoke to the WSWs rejected the attempt to counterpoise pensions to art. Many pointed to the fact that the unions had long used false promises of good pensions and medical benefits to impose concession contracts on workers over many years. In February 2012, AFSCME and other unions

offered to allow the city to freeze all future pension payments and to replace employer-paid pensions with 401(K)-type plans. The unions have since allowed the emergency manager to end city-paid retiree health care benefits.

Far from opposing the bankruptcy, the unions are only looking to get their own cut of the spoils from the looting of the city and stripping workers of what remains in jobs, pensions and essential services, including public access to culture. Above all, the union executives are seeking to defend their control of pension investments, which currently total over \$2 billion.

Hundreds of pension recipients volunteer at the museum and still more support it as the city's most beautiful jewel, visiting often with their families. As with every significant cultural experience, visits to the museum tend to bring people together and make them conscious, sensitive and aware—something that is inherently dangerous to the powers-that-be, including the union bureaucracy.

Teachers and other workers the WSWs interviewed rejected the assertion by the unions, banks and insurance companies that the DIA is a "non-essential" service, which the city simply cannot afford.

"It's disgusting! Exclamation point!" exclaimed Abby, when we asked her opinion of the threat to the DIA. She was visiting family members in Detroit for the holidays.

"This museum is on a level with the best in the world," she said, explaining how people around the country are following the crisis in Detroit. "We have heard about the bankruptcy on National Public Radio and from family members who live here.

"Art is really important to us. I am an art teacher. My mother is an art teacher. This is Detroit's culture they

are trying to take,” she declared, further describing the essential role of the museum as the foundation of culture and education.

“Looking at artworks in books, or on the Internet, is not the same thing as experiencing them right in front of you. Nothing can replace the impact of seeing them firsthand. How does it make you feel in the presence of such works? That is the nature of art. It is important for common people to see it, especially the historical artifacts which have been produced over the course of hundreds and thousands of years.

“The government does not think it is important for ordinary people to have this experience. Knowledge is power, and they do not want people to have it.

“They are doing the same thing in the public schools. I teach art in public school and so does my mother. We do not even have money in the school budget for art supplies. We have to bring what we can. They are pushing out everything from public education. I do not believe they have no money.”

Kniffy Fisher is a Detroit native who studies at Wayne County Community College. “Selling the art will cover only a small part of the debt,” she said. “What else are we going to lose when the museum is gone?

“Our professor of sociology wanted us to visit museums—either the Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History, the Arab Museum in Dearborn or the DIA. I think this is a MUST for everyone. It is a gem of the city. I do not want any art to be sold.”

Joanne worked for many years in the conservation laboratory at the DIA. She was attending the museum with Doug who is retired from the Engineering Department of the City of Detroit. “I agree with your campaign to protect the art and the pensions from being undermined,” she said. “I do not believe you can separate them. They want to put all of us into the position of starving rats fighting over a single crust.”

Joanne was contemptuous of AFSCME’s participation in the legal action to force the sale of art from the DIA. “It is what everybody signed up for years ago,” she said. “We accepted lower wages over many years because they told us we would get good pensions and good health care.”

“Pensions in Detroit are twenty thousand dollars a year,” added Doug. “In Chicago they are \$35,000; and

in New York, they are near 40,000.”

The present crisis is provoking more and more workers to reflect on the broader historical implications. Joanne said, “This is a horrible point in the history of this city. First of all, the overwhelming percentage of the profits of the major corporations goes directly to the CEOs and the top one percent of the income spectrum.

“Workers’ incomes have been kept flat, or cut, and they are shoved into part-time or temporary jobs. The money has all gone to the top 1 percent, and the rest of us have gotten nothing.”

Vincent Yarborough grew up in Detroit and brings his children to the museum on a regular basis.

“My kids almost grew up here. The museum is a very significant part of their education.

“Cody is going into archaeology, and this is crucial to his education. He has been interested in that from a young age. As a parent it is extremely important to me to have this for them. The art should not be sold. It is not theirs to sell.”

Nicolas and Alexandra were coming to the DIA for the first time. They had recently arrived from Paris, France. Nicolas will be teaching law at the University of Detroit Mercy. “It would be terrible,” he said, referring to the threat to “monetize” the artworks.

Then he added, “This is pretty much what is going on in Europe as well. There is so much potential here. Selling great art would kill every opportunity. It is crazy.”

Reggie Randall grew up in a neighborhood near the museum and has lived here all his life. “These are treasures which ought not to be sold,” he said. “They say they have no money. I think that is nonsense. You can save this museum.”



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