”They want to go back to the days when art was only for the wealthy”

DIA visitors support Workers Inquiry

Jerry White
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A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team campaigned outside the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) Saturday afternoon to build for the Workers Inquiry into the Attack on the DIA and the Bankruptcy of Detroit to be held by the SEP on February 15 at Wayne State University.

Campaigners, who included members of the Wayne State International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), engaged in constant discussions with museumgoers, many of whom passionately denounced the threat to sell the priceless collection of the DIA, which has been owned by the city and available to the public for more than a century.

Kevyn Orr, the city’s emergency manager, backed by the bankruptcy court, is seeking to “monetize” the art and extract $500 million from the DIA to pay off the Wall Street financiers who are looting the city. In a provocative act earlier this month, Orr released the results of the appraisal done by Christie’s Auction House of some of the museum’s most famous works, including paintings by Bruegel, Rembrandt, van Gogh and Frederick Edwin Church.

It was noticeable that many of those visiting the museum Saturday were workers who traveled long distances to visit the DIA before any harm was done to the collection. One auto parts factory worker told the WSWS he made the trip from Kalamazoo, 140 miles away, and brought his children to visit the DIA for the first time “in case they sell it.”

Campaigners also spoke with students from the nearby Center for Creative Studies who participated in the October 4 demonstration in front of the DIA organized by the SEP and IYSSE.

“The bankers don’t have dibs on the art, it’s for the people to enjoy,” said Edesly Said, a scientist from Ann Arbor. “The museum is the legacy of generations. I love Diego Rivera’s murals.”

“The art doesn’t belong to the banks and creditors—it belongs to the people,” said Gordon Richardson, an IT expert who previously worked at Chrysler and Ford. “There have to be laws to stop them from taking the art, but the rich don’t care about laws. I’ve seen charts showing that the top 10 percent of the population controls 80 percent of the wealth. It’s ridiculous.

“During the Chrysler bankruptcy in 2009,” he added, “Obama and Kevyn Orr, who worked on the bankruptcy, just tore up contracts and destroyed thousands of jobs, like mine. The politicians and these companies are screwing over the people and they don’t think the laws apply to them. The same is true for the unions. I’ve always said the unions have become everything that they fought against years ago.”

Referring to the Workers Inquiry, Gordon said, “Somebody has to fight to defend the art because the people that are supposed to aren’t.”

Abbie Diaz, who works at the nearby Michigan Science Center—which reopened a year ago after budget cuts and falling revenue led to its closure—stopped at the literature table to discuss the inquiry. “Yes, I’ll come to the Inquiry,” she said, as she registered to attend the event. “I graduated from Central Michigan University with a degree in Museum Studies. We have a club there that advocates for public museums.

“I love the DIA. It treats everybody equally. There are no age limits, no dress code. I read that the original British Museum required a letter of introduction to get into the front door. These museums are a critical resource especially for teachers, which need help

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because all the standardized tests they are forced to give don't allow them to properly teach art or science. People my age are very passionate about changing things and keeping the museums public. If they can sell off the art at the DIA they will do it everywhere. The museum holds the art as a trust for the people—that will end."

Daniel, a young student on his way to the DIA with his portfolio and drawing instruments, also stopped to discuss the Inquiry. "It would be an atrocity to Detroit and the people if they were able to steal the art. They're using the budget issue just to take away our cultural heritage.

"As far as they are concerned they want to go back to the Medieval or Renaissance times when the art belonged in the castle and only the wealthy could enjoy it. Seeing van Gogh in person is not the same as seeing it on the Internet with a flickering screen. It's amazing to live 15 or 16 miles away from these masterpieces—you feel you are part of history.

"The wealthy few are destroying us. It used to be the king, the queen and the lords. Now it's the banks, the hedge funds. The law doesn't say they can take the art but they are doing it anyway. It used to be the kings and queens were the law. Now it's the rich."

Frank O'Donnell recently retired from his last job at Focus Hope in Detroit, a nonprofit antipoverty program. "I've just read and heard that Detroit is like the canary in the coal mine. Other cities are in the same boat all across the country. If they can destroy pensions and sell off great works of art here, then they can do it anywhere. The biggest concern that I have is their ability to suspend the Constitution. Will they do this in other places the way they did it in Michigan? There are challenges to it by the ACLU, I think, and others, but this is a travesty.

"It's criminal the way they planned this so long ago. They are also trying to go after Social Security and set up a two-tier system for it the way they have with wages in auto. The greed of the oligarchy is so incomprehensible. I just read the *Grapes of Wrath*, everything is happening the same way it did in the story. I remember one of the characters who said he would like to shoot who was responsible, but he couldn't because it was the whole system!"

Michael Kramer, a carpenter and former contractor, was visiting the museum with his wife Mary. Both registered to attend the Inquiry after a wide-ranging discussion, particularly about the role of the Democratic Party, including the Obama administration, which is backing the bankruptcy of Detroit.

"What is happening here is a total fraud," Michael said. "It's a power grab. Nothing here is any where near democracy. The oligarchy—the top two percent—are taking away our rights. I worked for Obama in the elections and this is not 'the change I believe in'. I told the Democrats to stop calling me for donations. If they can get away with stealing pensions here they will do it to Social Security next. They keep talking about 'entitlements' but we paid into this for years and now they want to take it away.

"I want to fight not just for myself and my wife but for our grandkids. The rich want to bring back a feudal system. They're saying, 'We have the castle, the art and the moat, and the armies to defend our wealth. You may produce the food, but we're taking it.'

"What hubris they have. They take our pensions and think they have the power of popes and the Medici family to steal the art too.

"We'll be at the Inquiry. What you are doing to educate the people is the most important thing you can do."

For more information and to register for the Workers Inquiry click here.

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