

As media pushes governor's "rescue" fraud

Visitors to Detroit Institute of Arts discuss Workers Inquiry

Tim Rivers
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Visitors at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) have reacted with suspicion over the proposed scheme by federal mediators to put the museum's priceless collection into the hands of private foundations as part of the restructuring of the city by the bankruptcy court. Under the so-called "grand bargain," several national and local wealthy foundations will take over the museum and end the century-long city ownership of the DIA. In addition, \$100 million will be extracted from the cash-strapped institution.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, the federal mediators and the news media claim the deal will "save" the DIA and pensions. In fact, the takeover of the museum is part of a "plan of adjustment" soon to be publicly released by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, which will reduce payments to the retiree trust fund by as much as three-quarters, slash city worker health benefits and sell off other public assets to pay the city's debt holders.

The deal, which is being crafted behind the backs of the people of Detroit, is aimed at winning preapproval from the trade unions for the restructuring plan. According to press reports, a multimillion-dollar retiree health care trust fund will be given to the unions in exchange for their support. This slush fund is not to defend benefits—which the unions have already agreed to cut—but to shore up the income and privileges of the union executives.

A Socialist Equality Party campaign team distributed a statement at the DIA Saturday exposing the character of the proposed deal. In his statement, Lawrence Porter, SEP assistant national secretary and the head of the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions, denounced the deal,

saying, "The real purpose of the proposal is to politically disarm the working class with talk of a 'rescue package' and facilitate the looting of the city by the corporate and financial elite." (See "The fraud of Governor Snyder's 'rescue package' for Detroit" by Larry Porter.)

Danny works in a warehouse in Wixom, Michigan, an industrial suburb some thirty miles west of Detroit. He stopped and spoke to WSWs reporters as he was viewing the spectacular oil painting on a wood panel, entitled "the Wedding Dance," done in 1566 by the Dutch master Pieter Bruegel, the Elder.

The image portrays a bawdy, frolicking celebration of peasant nuptials. In Bruegel's time, the activities depicted were strictly prohibited by law. The artist's warm and brilliant embrace of the peasant celebration was itself an act of rebellion. Danny was quick to draw an analogy to the present day and the whole situation with the bankruptcy of Detroit.

"Today the government is trying to hold us back as well," he said, adding in reference to Bruegel's work, "It is neat [to see] how people were so happy in going against the laws of the times, to bring themselves into a new era." He talked about the economic crisis as seeming "like a wave pattern which gets better and then gets worse. It is hard to identify what is really happening. It seems like a never-ending cycle."

He felt it would be a terrible blow to the working class to lose access to the DIA and the history of art. For him it was an inspiration to be able to walk through the museum. "It's exciting to be here," he concluded.

Karina and Tim were visiting Detroit for the weekend from Holland, Michigan, on the western side of the state. Both seemed thrilled to see the museum for the

first time. It was the highpoint of their trip. “Everybody told us about the DIA,” said Karina, “Our cab driver, the people at the hotel. When we asked about cool sites to see in Detroit, everyone said the DIA.” Both she and Tim reacted with horror when we explained the threat to privatize the city’s most prized, public possession.

“That is terrible,” Tim gasped. “It is crazy that they would even want to get rid of the art in a public museum like this.” He went on to describe their first encounter with the famous collections, which had been, as for many visitors, an exhilarating and deeply educational experience. “We have been looking at things from way back in history.” The collections demonstrated in the most general sense “where we have come from and where we are going.”

Mathew Zaleski was visiting the city, from Toronto, Canada, with his wife, for her birthday. While he is a software engineer, he is deeply concerned about the deindustrialization and destruction of living standards in Detroit. “That is one of the reasons we are here,” he said. “I hope it is the end of [good wages] hitting bottom.” Commenting on the development of computer-driven, globalized production, he noted the transformation of production itself and the social devastation that resulted from the capitalist profit system that concentrates enormous wealth in the hands of a very few. The record profits at Ford were predicated on cutting wages from \$28.00 per hour to \$14.00. He was stunned.

“Can you live at all in Detroit on \$14.00 per hour?” he wanted to know. “In Tennessee, maybe, but in a big city, NO WAY!” he added emphatically. “In Toronto you couldn’t.”

He was reflecting on the implications for coming social struggles. “This seems to me the giant challenge of capitalism,” was how he framed the question. Speaking of the billionaires who stride the globe and carve up a city like Detroit, he asked, “How do you beat a guy with resources like that? Eventually, if you have enough people convinced, they cannot advertise enough on television to overcome people’s convictions.”

Molly Madigan commented from in front of the Rivera murals in the central courtyard, “It’s wrong! The museum should remain public.”

On Friday afternoon, a team of SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality supporters took

the campaign for the Workers Inquiry to Ford’s Wayne Assembly plant where workers build the Focus and C-Max models. Some 250 copies of the Auto Workers Newsletter were distributed, inviting workers to attend the upcoming inquiry.

One Ford worker, Henry, said one of his coworkers wanted to trade in his Mustang for a truck and was not able afford, on the wages he made at the factory, a standard sized F-150. Last week Ford announced 2013 profits of \$7.2 billion, chiefly attained through the savage cost cutting in the auto industry spearheaded by the Obama administration with the collaboration of the United Auto Workers union.

“That’s how they made the money,” Henry said, referring to wage cuts and speedup. He was scornful of the profit-sharing checks, which have been announced, amounting to approximately \$6,000.00 in take-home pay. The amount does not begin to compensate workers for the wage freezes, pay and benefit cuts and the destruction of conditions in the factory, which have reduced labor costs by 10 percent since 2009.

Henry said he expects a wave of buyouts that will force higher-paid, higher-seniority workers, like himself, out of the factory. “I hired in during 1999 at just over \$14.00 an hour,” he said. “But at that time, you could advance to full pay of \$28.00 an hour with benefits.” Not any more. Everything changed, “When they brought in the two-tier wages system,” he added. “I knew then I represent the end of an era.

“My partner [on the line] got hired from the unemployment office,” he explained. “He had started in 2002 as a temporary worker and just got hired in full time last year. As a temp he was making \$22.00 and \$24.00 per hour, but when he got the full-time job, he was cut down to \$15.00 per hour with an \$18.00 cap as the highest pay he would be able to make.”



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