Report to the Workers Inquiry

Art and the working class

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26 February 2014

The Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions was held Saturday, February 15 at Wayne State University. The World Socialist Web Site *published an initial report on the meeting on February 17. Today we publish an edited version of the report to the Inquiry delivered by David Walsh, WSWS arts editor.*

The report to the Inquiry by WSWS Labor Editor and Socialist Equality Party 2012 presidential candidate Jerry White can be accessed here. *The report by Larry Porter, assistant national secretary of the SEP and chairman of the Workers Inquiry, can be accessed* here. *The report by Tom Carter, WSWS legal correspondent, can be accessed* here.

I would like to explain why we think the defense of the Detroit Institute of Arts, along with other museums, libraries and cultural institutions, and the right of the working class to have access to culture are so important.

Since last May, as part of the effort to drive Detroit into bankruptcy, loot the city of all its valuable assets and place the whole burden of the financial crisis on the back of the working population, the DIA has been under almost constant threat.

Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr and his colleagues, supported by Republican and Democratic state and city politicians and the unions, have repeated many times that selling the art in the DIA is "on the table," to help pay the city's debts to the wealthy creditors.

In August, the emergency manager hired the New York-based auction house Christie's to begin putting price tags on works that were bought directly by the city of Detroit (and therefore, ostensibly, could be sold to help pay the debt). Christie's issued its report in mid-December. It appraised 1,741 works bought by the city of Detroit and put their market value at between $450 million and $870 million. The art market, which hit record highs last year, is drooling over many of these works.

Most recently, the DIA has been forced by Governor Rick Snyder, Judges Steven Rhodes and Gerald Rosen and Orr to accept the so-called "grand bargain" under which the museum will have to come up with a $100-million contribution over 20 years. Also, the DIA is to be placed under the control of an "independent nonprofit." It will no longer be a city-owned museum, which it has been for 95 years.

We completely oppose and reject this deal, which involves squeezing money out of the DIA and slashing the pensions of retirees, all for the benefit of banks and bondholders. It is a "bargain," a compromise, only in the sense that handing over nine-tenths of what a thief demands from you is a "compromise."

The rotten agreement raises many issues in relation to the DIA:

First, DIA officials would have agreed to make the $100 million payout only "at gunpoint," so to speak. The politicians and Orr no doubt threatened museum officials that the alternative was selling off important works, which would mean the end of the DIA as a serious art institution, or even its closure.

Second, the $100 million demand is totally unjustified. The museum is not responsible for the economic crisis and the debts run up by the crooks who run the city of Detroit.

Third, it will be almost impossible for the museum to raise that sum. The DIA has difficulty meeting its bills at the moment. The burden may well force it to sell art, if not this year, then some time in the future. The deal has resolved nothing.

Fourth, the end of the DIA as a public museum has major implications. The super-rich who run America hate the idea that the people of Detroit think they own the museum and have a right to access the artwork. In the opinion of the very rich, everything of value in society should be owned and controlled by them, the one percent at the top of society.

In one way or another, the wealthy elite want to get their hands on the artwork in the DIA. They think it's ridiculous and even insulting that a worker and his or her family can walk into the museum and find themselves, in half a minute, in front of Vincent van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Straw Hat* [1887], for example, or Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals [1932-33].

In the end, the super-rich would like to possess van Gogh's self-portrait, for example—valued today at $80,000,000 to $150,000,000, originally purchased for $3,700—and other works that have been off the market for nearly a century, and put them in their homes or private museums as an investment and as a status symbol. It would make them feel like kings.

In fact, many of the great works in the museum were bought with public funds. The DIA is highly unusual in the US in this regard. Between 1922 and 1930, when the Great Depression hit, and to a lesser extent between 1945 and 1953, the DIA bought many great works of art with money allocated to it by the city of Detroit. To use public money for art was almost unheard of among American museums, then or now. It is a remarkable and creditable feature of Detroit's history, and it has a great deal to do with the presence of the industrial working class.

It is therefore doubly and triply illegitimate that these works should now fall into the hands of multibillion-dollar foundations, run by major corporations, much less be sold off to billionaire investors. Whatever the politicians and museum officials say now, the privatization of the museum will end up making the artwork less accessible, or inaccessible, to the public.

If they succeed, the example of the DIA will help pave the way across the country, and around the world, for that matter, for the return of conditions when kings, queens and aristocrats and top church officials commissioned and owned all the major artwork, bought and sold it, showed it or kept it to themselves as they pleased, and the broad masses of the people were kept as ignorant and illiterate and submissive as possible. This is the situation that existed in Europe until the late 18th century, when important royal or princely collections were made public in France, Italy and Germany.

King Louis XIV (1638-1715) in France, for example, commissioned over 300 formal portraits of himself. He was also the chief patron of the arts in France. With the return of the aristocracy to America, should we now have artistic celebrations of the new billionaire aristocrats, like Bill

Gates and Warren Buffett?

The rich everywhere want to get their hands on great art for money and prestige reasons, but they are also hostile and opposed to workers looking at art and thinking about it. Art broadens people, makes them more aware of the way the world is, and the way people are. Art encourages people to be imaginative, and more open, and discontented with their oppression and poverty. Art, from the point of view of the elite, is dangerous.

Under slavery, before the Civil War in the US, teaching a slave to read was a criminal offense, because a slave who could read was a dangerous human being.

This is the law in South Carolina, for example, passed in 1740: "Whereas, having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money."

Today, under modern capitalism, a worker who reads the wrong (that is, socialist) books or web sites, a worker who looks at and thinks about art is dangerous. There are no statutes against it, but in practice the ruling elite makes it as difficult as possible for workers to develop themselves culturally and intellectually, and, as we now know, the National Security Agency uses technology to find out what people are reading and what they are thinking.

We do everything in our power, on the other hand, to promote interest in art and literature in the working class. This is the tradition of the socialist movement all over the world. We fight to defend and improve the economic position of the working class, but we also recognize, in the memorable words of the Gospel of St. Matthew, that "man does not live by bread alone," and that a working class movement worthy of the name has to be broad, deep, cultured and sensitive to the entire human condition. Being able to fight, prepare for and defeat all our enemies, in the corporations, the government, the trade unions, means that we need a movement of the most advanced thinking and feeling.

I include the unions in this group of enemies of the working class for a reason. In the Detroit crisis and in every other attack on the working class, the unions are on the other side of the fence, accomplices of the government and the companies. Since last summer, the unions in Detroit have been among the strongest advocates of selling the artwork at the DIA, supposedly to defend pensions—in reality, to get a portion of the spoils for themselves.

We asked Ed McNeil from AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees], the biggest union among city workers, whether he was in favor of selling the art, and he replied, infamously, "You can't eat art." This is sheer ignorance combined with political reaction.

What is the record of McNeil and AFSCME? They have sold workers out at every point. They offered $180 million in concessions before the Detroit bankruptcy was declared, trying to convince Michigan's governor that he could do the job of lowering workers' wages and benefits without an emergency manager. The city unions have seen the municipal workforce drop from 18,000 to less than 10,000, and costs cut by a third, at the workers' expense, without lifting a finger.

If McNeil and company have their way, workers certainly won't be "eating art," but they won't be eating anything else either!

The same goes for the United Auto Workers [UAW], historically the most important union in the area. Bob King, president of the UAW, has occasionally proclaimed his support for the DIA, but in the recent Detroit mayoral election, King and the UAW supported Benny Napoleon, the sheriff of Wayne County, the "businessman with a badge," as he called himself, who was outspoken in his contempt for the museum. When it came to the city's assets, Napoleon proclaimed, "I think they should take the DIA first."

King of the UAW, McNeil of AFSCME and their associates are enemies of the working class, and their contempt for art and culture proves it. I'll get back to this issue a bit later.

I want to speak briefly now about the history of the Detroit Institute of Arts and its relationship to the working class in Detroit. It is an unusual museum, with a highly unusual history.

The DIA was founded, first as the Detroit Museum of Art, in the 1880s by wealthy individuals in the newspaper industry and other businesses. At this time, after the American Civil War, when support for equality and democracy was very strong, even among some of the big business people, a series of art and science museums, as well as public library systems, were established in the US, including:

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (1870), the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (1870), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1876), the Art Institute of Chicago (1879), the Cincinnati Art Museum (1881) and the Detroit Institute of Arts (1885). The American Museum of Natural History was founded in New York in 1869.

In part, the rich had their own self-interest in mind. They needed a more educated population to work in industry and offices. Museums, with their imposing buildings and collections, were also supposed to remind visitors of the strength and permanence of the social order. The powers that be also wanted to incorporate the many immigrant workers, who often tended to be socialists, into American life and convince them that the US was a land of opportunity and democracy. They also believed in education at the time, as a principle. That was considered a solution to many problems.

The Detroit museum was turned over to the city in 1919 because private funding was inadequate, and—now named the Detroit Institute of Arts—became a department of the city of Detroit. This was very unusual in the history of art museums in the US. In the 1920s, as I mentioned, during the boom in the auto industry and the enormous growth of the city's population, the museum received adequate funding from the city and many great works of art were purchased.

Let me say a few words about the director of the museum at the time, a remarkable individual named William [or Wilhelm] Valentiner [1880-1958]. He was born in Germany and trained by the greatest museum organizers in the world at the time, in the Berlin museums. He came to America before World War I, then went back to Germany and served in the German military in that war.

At the end of the First World War, a revolution brought down the emperor in Germany, the Kaiser, and the working class threatened to take power into its own hands. The Russian Revolution had just taken place. In the end, the German workers were betrayed and capitalism survived, but Wilhelm Valentiner participated in the revolution and attempted to organize artists for the cause of artistic and social change.

After he became director of the DIA in 1924, Valentiner worked with the Ford family and many other rich people, but he had certain ideas about art that he never changed. He believed that art "could attain greatness only by contact with the suffering masses and by drawing spiritual sustenance from their tragic experiences." He also believed that the most important art "arises from greater depths, [and] embodies the broad masses of the people." When people tell you this is an "elite" institution, you can remind them of this.

Valentiner bought many beautiful works, including the ones that the emergency manager attempted to use this year as bargaining chips: for example, *The Wedding Dance* (1566) by Pieter Bruegel, who lived in what is today Belgium and painted the common people of his time, which was highly unusual. Most artists painted aristocrats or mythological scenes or religious figures. Bruegel painted peasants. This painting is today worth between $100,000,000 and $200,000,000, according to Christie's, the auction house.

Valentiner also bought van Gogh's self-portrait. Van Gogh also painted the common people, postmen, peasants, bar owners, etc. He hated the people who made lots of money out of art.

Valentiner also bought African art, including a commemorative portrait of a queen mother from Nigeria, mid-18th to mid-19th century, valued at $150,000 to $400,000. And an ivory knife case from the Congo or Angola in the 16th-18th century, today worth about $1,000,000. The DIA was also the first museum to have a section devoted to the pre-European art of the Western hemisphere.

In 1931, Valentiner hired the Mexican artist and socialist Diego Rivera to paint murals in the DIA's courtyard. This was during the Depression, when the population was suffering terribly and millions of people were turning against capitalism. Rivera came to Detroit because he was fascinated by the auto industry and because he believed the working class was the central force in society. Major protests had begun against the starvation conditions in Detroit when Rivera arrived. He studied the auto plants and made hundreds of detailed drawings. Then he began to paint his murals, which took him months, sometimes 18 hours a day.

The *Detroit Industry* murals form one the world's great works of art, certainly one of, if not the greatest, work of art of the 20th century. The murals show the process of making a car from beginning to end and place the auto workers at the center of the picture, but they also depict nature, the origins of humanity and society, the relationship between humanity and nature, the role of science and technology, both positive and negative.

Rivera and Valentiner came under violent attack from right-wing forces in Detroit while the murals were being painted in 1932 and early 1933. A number of Catholic and Protestant clergy, newspaper editorialists, wealthy men and women, all sorts of reactionary elements in Detroit came together in their hostility to these murals. They were denounced as "ugly," "vulgar," "distasteful," "atheistic," "pornographic" and "communist." Much of the elite in Detroit was insulted because the auto workers were in the forefront, and not they. Incidentally, 10,000 people visited the DIA the day the murals were first open to the public, and 70,000-100,000 visited within the month.

In my opinion, sections of the Detroit elite never forgave the DIA and Valentiner for hiring Diego Rivera to paint these murals. There were those at the time who demanded that the murals be painted over or destroyed. There are many who still feel that way. It is my belief that one of the reasons (not the only one, of course) that the museum has not been strongly supported by many of the wealthy, and why the DIA has always been one of the poorest museums in America in terms of its endowment, is because of these murals, which champion the working class.

The museum in Detroit is unlike any other, from this point of view. It has in its central courtyard a tribute to the working class in the form of Rivera's murals, which themselves reflect and are a product of the big social struggles in Detroit, and which have always been very popular with auto workers and other workers. This courtyard says something important about the reality of modern society, about capitalism, and this is very, very unusual.

Valentiner and his very skilled staff built the museum collection through enormous effort and self-sacrifice. They did it for the people of the city of Detroit, using the money of the people of the city of Detroit. As Valentiner said at the time of the current building's opening in 1927, they intended the art to be accessible to everyone, "rich and poor, high and low."

The museum has almost always been on shaky financial grounds. It almost closed in the 1910s, before the city took it over. It closed its doors briefly in 1932, during the Depression, when the city cut its budget to the bone and most of the staff was laid off (Valentiner took a leave of absence). In 1975, under Mayor Coleman Young, the museum again closed its doors, for three weeks this time, as the crisis of the auto industry and American industry generally began to hit. In 1991, the state of Michigan slashed its funds for the DIA. The museum now receives no state money whatsoever. In 1998, the city handed over responsibility for day-to-day operations to a private group, the Founders' Society.

In 2012, the DIA and the city promoted a vote for a millage, so that taxpayers in the three metropolitan counties would help subsidize the museum. We understood why people voted for the millage, to help the DIA survive, but we said that the cost of running the museum should not be borne by the working-class taxpayer. It set a dangerous precedent that the city's population should have to pay out of its pocket for a vital institution like an art museum.

And now the many years of efforts to build up a museum, the possibility of future generations being able to view the artwork, are threatened so that Wall Street can get its blood money.

We have been fighting since last May against the attack on the DIA. No one has a record like the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party on this question. In October, we organized the first and only serious protest to date against the attack on the DIA.

The emergency manager and his accomplices, along with the media, have used the argument from the beginning that keeping the DIA's art collection together had to be weighed against the pensions and benefits of city workers. We said last May that this argument was "cynical and contemptible." We said that if the authorities in Detroit and Wall Street had their way, Detroit residents would not have either "safe streets," public services and jobs *or* a significant art museum—while the creditors, lawyers, politicians, art vultures and consultants would walk away with tons of cash.

A group of local demagogues, politicians and ministers has argued that—and I quote from one here—"to place a choke hold on seniors' pensions while protecting art at the DIA is wrong!" This is a falsehood, and it usually goes along with attempts to promote social backwardness and, often, racialism.

What prevents the population from having both a major museum and decent pensions and benefits? These demagogues never attack the billionaires who are robbing everyone. They always attempt to pit one section of the population against another, the retiree against the museumgoer, for example. They also treat the present situation as some natural occurrence, like an earthquake or a hurricane. But it is not. It is the product of capitalism, the profit system, and its priorities.

It is completely phony to argue that the population can have either art or pensions, but not both. Why? In fact, the history of the DIA and the history of struggles by the working class prove that attacks on the museum, threats to its existence, have always gone hand in hand with attacks on the working population.

This is what happened in the 1930s and 1970s, when the museum had to close its doors temporarily. The population wasn't spared when the museum was attacked. The working class did not get any advantage from the museum's near bankruptcy. And the museum has never benefited from any attacks on the working class.

In fact, the economic and cultural conditions of the working class are bound up together. When the workers fight, they make both economic and cultural gains. When they are prevented from fighting or their struggles are betrayed, they lose economically and culturally.

A ruling class that proposes to destroy a public art museum will not hesitate to destroy everything the working class has—its jobs, its pensions, its schools.

There is more than enough money around to support an art museum open to the public free of charge, seven days a week, 12 hours a day or more. We are not defending the way the present museum is organized and run. The working class is deprived of culture, and that is not simply a matter of hours and admission fees. Genuine access requires knowledge and education, which is incompatible with the crisis-ridden capitalist system.

The DIA, and every art museum, should be expanded, there should be branches of the museum in working-class neighborhoods, an idea that was actually proposed in Detroit in 1919; billions have to be spent on art and music education in the public schools.

There should be vast sums spent on encouraging younger artists, who are unable to make a living or forced to do rubbish. A new generation of artists will have a different attitude toward capitalism, a far more critical attitude.

The working class has the right to culture and art, along with the right to decent jobs, education, health care, housing. We are not begging anyone for these things. Nothing has been won without struggle.

In our view, in conclusion, the DIA can be defended only on the basis of a political struggle against the present social system. Its fate cannot depend on the generosity of billionaires, on their plans and whims. The museum should be publicly owned, publicly run, publicly planned and organized. Art belongs to the people, not the rich.