

Detroit Institute of Arts on track to become wholly owned corporate subsidiary

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The Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) announced at a press conference Wednesday that it had received pledges of another \$26.8 million in donations from various major corporations and banks toward its goal of raising \$100 million as part of the so-called “Grand Bargain.”

The nine new contributors include Penske Corp. (\$10 million), Dan Gilbert’s Quicken Loans/Rock Ventures (\$5 million), DTE Energy (\$5 million), Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan (\$2.5 million), Meijer, Comerica Bank, the JPMorgan Chase Foundation (\$1 million each), Consumers Energy (\$800,000) and the Delta Air Lines Foundation (\$500,000).

Companies and foundations previously announcing contributions include the A. Paul and Carol C. Schaap Foundation (\$5 million), the Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation (\$2.5 million), the Ford Motor Co. Fund (\$10 million), the General Motors Co./General Motors Foundation (\$10 million), the Chrysler Group (\$6 million), the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (\$10 million, including \$5 million contingent on the DIA’s raising the entire \$100 million) and the J. Paul Getty Trust (\$3 million).

Under the terms of the Grand Bargain, being implemented by the city’s unelected emergency manager Kevyn Orr, the state of Michigan, the DIA and various national and local foundations have agreed to put in \$816 million over 20 years, supposedly to protect the museum’s art collection and “ease” cuts to the pensions of city workers.

Current and retired city workers are presently being bludgeoned into voting for reductions to their own pensions with the argument that if they turn down the proposal, their pensions will be slashed even more dramatically. The city unions have given their blessing to this blackmail.

Detroit’s bankruptcy and everything associated with it, including the Grand Bargain, is an illegal operation,

organized by powerful economic forces and both Democrats and Republicans to impose misery on wide layers of the population as part of the “restructuring” of the city in the interests of the banks and the corporate elite.

As part of this devil’s bargain, the DIA, a public institution since 1919, will become the property of a private nonprofit corporation. A great deal of column space, as well as airtime, is currently being devoted to convincing the population that the Grand Bargain is not only unavoidable but positively beneficial. This is a gigantic lie.

For example, the transfer of the DIA to the control of private foundations, associated with some of the largest fortunes (and most ruthless corporate histories and practices) in the US, has vast implications. The establishment of art and science museums as public institutions, along with public school and library systems, was an achievement won by the working population. The ruling class, in the end, was forced to make both cultural and economic concessions in the middle of the 20th century out of its fear of social upheaval and in the shadow of the Russian Revolution.

Today, in terminal decline, American capitalism is carrying out a social counterrevolution in every sphere of social life. As part of this scorched earth policy, schools, libraries, museums, orchestras and arts programs of every type and description are on the chopping block. While trillions of dollars slosh through the financial markets each day, “there is no money” for the elementary needs of the population.

As we have argued before on the WSWWS, we are seeing the return of the “aristocratic principle.” In so far as the people are to have access to education and culture it will be out of the “generosity” of the very, very rich (Gates, Zuckerberg, etc.), to whom the people ought to be appropriately grateful. Of course, this also means that

popular access to education and culture exists at the *whim* of the very, very rich, who can control or block that access as they see fit. A society operated along such lines cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be defined as democratic—it is a plutocracy.

This is a global process. The *New York Times* reported July 15 that the upkeep and refurbishing of Italy's immense cultural treasures are increasingly in the hands of firms such as Bulgari, Tod's, Fendi and others, as well as Saudi oil tycoons and assorted billionaires. The *Times* cites the comment of Tomaso Montanari, a professor of art history at the University of Naples: "In Italy, we are seeing now something that happened in the UK with Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, an anti-state rhetoric in favor of privatizations."

It is a sign of the intellectual and cultural times that it apparently occurs to none of the officials at museums and other institutions around the world that handing over humanity's cultural heritage to corporate vultures has any "down side." In any case, if these individuals have misgivings they keep them to themselves.

Certainly, no public figure in Detroit would speak out against this reprehensible development. No one in the media, no leading academic at any of the city's universities and colleges will point out the obvious: that many of the companies (including, first and foremost, the auto makers, DTE Energy, Consumer's Energy, Comerica Bank, Quicken Loans, etc.) making donations to the DIA bear a large share of the responsibility for the city's devastation and bankruptcy. They have coined fortunes out of Detroit's population and, in the case of the auto companies, closed down dozens of factories, forcing tens of thousands into poverty. These firms' executives lead lives of luxury unimaginable to Detroit's working class population.

No surprise, none of this was on the minds of those present at Wednesday's press conference at the DIA (held, obscenely, in the Diego Rivera court). The event was, on the contrary, a celebration of the power of the wealthy to determine the shape of the city's cultural life.

Walter Czarnecki of Penske Corp. called the grand bargain a "spirit of unity and commitment we haven't seen in Detroit in quite a while." Mayor Mike Duggan, former president and CEO of the Detroit Medical Center (who presided over the sale of the previously nonprofit medical center to Vanguard Health Systems), gushed, "I am just overwhelmed. I have lived and worked in this city my entire life, and I can't remember a time of such unity and hope." Bankruptcy mediator Judge Gerald Rosen was

also present. Duggan paid tribute to Rosen's "genius" for having thought up the Grand Bargain.

In a statement released to coincide with the DIA's announcement, DTE—responsible for cutting off electricity to thousands of Detroit's most impoverished and vulnerable residents—said it was "proud to be a part of a growing group of corporate and community leaders that are stepping up to support the city of Detroit and do their part to preserve one of the state's and region's jewels."

The notion that donations from powerful economic interests to the DIA come with no strings attached is a fantasy, or wishful thinking. When the rich buy something, which, in effect, they are doing in the case of the DIA, they do it to benefit themselves and no one else.

Representatives of the wealthy elite will increasingly and far more directly determine the DIA's officialdom and policies, what goes on at the museum, what is shown, what is said about the art on display, what access the public has to the collection, and so on. At best, the DIA will become more of a mausoleum, distant from the daily life of the people.

At worst, it will tend to become the private domain of the financial and corporate aristocracy. (One of the events that outraged many Italians recently was a dinner held in Florence by investment banker Morgan Stanley inside a 14th-century chapel for a rental fee of \$27,000).

Moreover, the privatization of the DIA will mean that when the next financial crisis erupts, as it inevitably must, the area's population will have no say in how the museum's new owners dispose of the art collection, a collection that was in significant part built out of public funds.

To those who say, "Yes, very true, but what else can be done under the circumstances?" we respond: first of all, you have to be willing to fight. The Grand Bargain "solution" to the DIA's crisis is no solution at all, but benefits the elite and separates the museum from the people. Second, there is a way forward: fighting for the mobilization of the working class independent of the politicians and the unions on a socialist program of defending every economic, social and cultural right.



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