

The “rescue” of the Detroit Institute of Arts has resolved nothing

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The population of Detroit and beyond is currently under bombardment from the media and political establishment to the effect that the city has been “brought back from the brink,” “reborn,” and generally rescued through the shrewdness, generosity and even “sacrifice” of the elite.

Since the rich in America are criminal and predatory, and refuse as a matter of principle to give up a penny of their ill-gotten gains, this propaganda barrage ought to be viewed with the greatest skepticism.

In reality, the “Grand Bargain” imposed on Detroit includes robbing the legally protected pensions of thousands of retirees and gutting their health benefits, extorting \$100 million from the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), and carrying out other violations of basic democratic rights. It opens the door to further savage attacks on wages, benefits and public services, which will not be long in coming. The precedent has been set.

As for the supposed sagacity of various corporate moguls, politicians and judges ... was their decision to rely on the trade unions, various local officials and the miserable “left” protest movements to push the rotten settlement through a sign of breath-taking political insight?

After all, in recent decades the unions and their hangers-on have demonstrated over and over again their willingness to do anything to defend the profit system, as long as they received what they viewed as a reasonable share of the spoils. Calling on union bureaucrats to sell the devastation of pensions as a “victory” for workers was knocking on an open door.

The so-called rescue of the DIA deserves special attention, because it raises a number of complex questions. As part of the Grand Bargain, the art museum, a publicly owned institution since 1919, has effectively been sold to a group of private foundations representing some of the most powerful financial, corporate and political interests in the US.

(At a November 7, 2014 press conference, US District Chief Judge Gerald Rosen, the federal mediator in the bankruptcy case, referred to a meeting 12 months earlier he had held with the heads of the various foundations, during which he discussed a plan for those organizations to “essentially buy the museum.”)

Under the deal, the city will receive \$816 million over 20 years from these foundations, the state of Michigan and DIA donors that will go toward retiree pensions.

What are the implications of this deal?

In the first place, the handing over of a major public institution such as the DIA to private interests, whatever the short-term outcome, is one of the sharpest manifestations yet of the return of the aristocratic principle to American life. According to this principle, the population

has no inalienable right to education or culture. Everything depends on the munificence of billionaire executives and financiers. If schools are to remain open, or a museum or orchestra to continue operating, the intercession of a plutocrat, or his or her representatives, is required.

Moreover, anyone who was seriously paying attention last year knows full well that news of the DIA’s priceless collection possibly being up for grabs was greeted with drooling eagerness by a host of speculators and other quasi-criminal interests. Their appetite has only been whetted. They await the next opportunity to loot the museum, under what they hope will be more propitious conditions.

The Grand Bargain arrangements are no guarantee whatsoever of the DIA’s collection remaining intact or the museum’s continuing to exist. Even in the midst of the self-congratulatory and complacent celebrations held by DIA officials and wealthy donors, the financial realities remain harsh and unfavorable.

As the *Detroit Free Press*, one of the chief celebrants in recent weeks, was obliged to observe on November 9: “Still, the DIA cannot afford to relax for long. It faces hurdles on multiple fronts, most notably a commitment to raising roughly \$350 million for endowment and annual operations in the next eight years—in addition to the \$13 million needed to top off the \$100 million [it has pledged of \$87 million] the museum committed to the so-called grand bargain to protect art and pensions as part of the city’s bankruptcy.”

What assurance does anyone have that the foundations that now own the museum and hold its art in trust will not offer critical portions of the collection for sale in the next financial crunch, which will inevitably arrive? Through the Grand Bargain, the museum’s art work has been further removed and alienated from the control of the population, for whom it was purchased.

The various foundations—Ford, Kresge, Kellogg, Knight and others—are not neutral, innocent bystanders who have been called on in an emergency. These are semi-official bodies that perform a useful, “lubricating” function in American society. Their funds, of course, derive ultimately from the exploitation of the working class by the respective corporate entities. The foundations use their money to fund programs and institutions in the US and all across the globe that serve the ruling elite directly or promote illusions in capitalism.

The Ford Foundation has a long record of collaboration with the highest levels of the American state, including the CIA. John J. McCloy, for example, chairman of the foundation’s board of trustees from 1958 to 1965, was a central figure in the postwar military-intelligence apparatus. According to historian Joan Roelofs, McCloy “thought of the foundation as a quasi-extension of the US government. It was his habit, for instance, to drop by the National

Security Council (NSC) in Washington every couple of months and casually ask whether there were any overseas projects the NSC would like to see funded [that is, by the Ford Foundation].”

McGeorge Bundy, president of the Ford Foundation from 1966 to 1979, was another leading Cold War figure. As US national security adviser, Bundy was one of those chiefly responsible for the escalation of the Vietnam War.

The current president of the Ford Foundation, Darren Walker, who reportedly played a critical role in the Grand Bargain, is an African American lawyer and banker. He previously worked for Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS), served as a vice president at the Rockefeller Foundation, and filled the post of vice president for education, creativity and free expression at the Ford Foundation. According to the foundation’s web site, “He also oversaw Ford Foundation’s regional programming in four offices based in Africa and the Middle East,” i.e., he was deeply involved in US imperialist machinations in those critical regions.

The more one looks at the “rescue” of the DIA, and, in particular, the timeline of that effort, the more it becomes obvious that this was a highly political affair.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2013, following the appointment in March of Kevyn Orr as Detroit’s unelected emergency manager, various provocative and threatening public statements were issued by Orr and his cronies in regard to the possible sale of the DIA’s collection, or substantial portions of it.

According to a *Free Press* account, in May 2013, one of the city’s leading attorneys, Bruce Bennett, in a meeting with DIA officials, “said there was nothing to stop Orr as emergency manager from canceling the DIA’s operating agreement with the city, firing [DIA Director Graham] Beal and seizing the collection.” Orr meanwhile called the sale of the DIA’s art an “open item for the future.”

Shortly thereafter, the city hired Christie’s auction house to appraise the DIA collection, stepping up the threats against the museum. The most aggressive creditors, dissatisfied with Orr’s plans, were simultaneously organizing their own estimates of the DIA art’s value and beginning to offer the priceless works to prospective buyers. They had the support of the city unions.

However, despite all the chloroforming carried out by the Democratic Party, the unions and others, popular anger over the possible sale of the museum, as well as the potential devastation of pensions, was also growing. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters found widespread support for the DIA, whether speaking to visitors on the steps of the museum or workers at local auto plants.

This sentiment of opposition found its highest expression in the demonstration in defense of the DIA and against the bankruptcy organized by the Socialist Equality Party on October 4, 2013, attended by hundreds of young people and workers. The rally, which was covered by the local media, raised genuine concerns within the establishment that resistance to their plans might attain a critical mass.

Shortly after the SEP demonstration, in early November 2013, Judge Rosen, a right-wing Bush appointee, assembled a group of foundation heads and gave them a talking to. Independently, Beal and DIA Chief Operating Officer Annmarie Erickson had previously traveled to New York and met with Walker of the Ford Foundation, to no avail.

On November 5, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, “the judge [Rosen] ushered more than a dozen leaders of some of the nation’s largest foundations, including Ford, Kresge and Community, into a conference room in the federal courthouse in downtown Detroit.

Judge Rosen and his team gave the group a harsh private tutorial ...

about the risks of prolonged litigation in Chapter 9 bankruptcy and the possible tragedy unfolding if Detroit was forced to sell its art. The afternoon briefing was supposed to last about an hour, but it went more than three.”

In other words, important figures in the ruling elite determined that the sale of the DIA art collection would have far-reaching consequences. The economic impact of closing down one of Detroit’s relatively few remaining tourist attractions, especially on the city’s downtown, was no doubt a factor. Significant figures in the business community were opposed all along to the sale of the DIA collection.

However, more was involved than merely the immediate or even long-term financial consequences. The DIA is an unusual museum. The very fact that it was publicly owned, for a lengthy period of time a city department, which used taxpayers’ money to purchase art work, made it an uncommon institution in the US.

Most importantly, the DIA’s collection was assembled and its centerpiece, Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* fresco cycle, created during the period of technological development and intense class struggle in the auto industry in the 1920s and 1930s. The museum’s relationship with the working class in the city and the region was firmly cemented, so to speak, during those explosive years.

To destroy the DIA for the obvious benefit of Wall Street had the potential to inflame popular opposition to dangerous levels. Rosen, Walker of the Ford Foundation and the other foundation chiefs intervened to head off that “possible tragedy.”

The immediate preservation of the DIA has resolved nothing, financially or culturally. The museum rose to prominence with the rise of the American auto industry and its fortunes have declined along with the fortunes of that industry.

To depend on any section of the “philanthropic” ruling elite for the defense of the DIA—or culture generally—is to court certain disaster. Its pragmatic decision to maintain the DIA this time around can easily give way to the opposite, and the media would turn on a dime to justify such a move.

The upper-middle class quasi-intelligentsia, including the officialdom of the DIA, has proven itself impotent in the face of the crisis of American capitalism. Such people may wring their hands or celebrate their deliverance, depending on the circumstances, but they cannot offer any consistent or serious opposition to the banks and corporations whose every move makes them tremble.

The defense of art and culture, and of the museums and other institutions that hold past and present treasures, falls to the working class, animated by a socialist program and perspective. The transformation and reconstruction of society on the basis of the principle of solidarity demands a high level of sensitivity and intelligence. The defense of the social right to culture must become the conscious aim of a revived workers movement.



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