

Campaign to defend historic, Depression-era “Life of Washington” murals in San Francisco

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The WSWWS recently spoke to Robert Cherny, professor emeritus of history at San Francisco State University, about the campaign to preserve murals about the life of George Washington located at an area high school. The 13 historic frescoes were painted by left-wing Russian émigré artist Victor Arnautoff—a disciple of Diego Rivera—in 1936, during the Great Depression. Arnautoff, a remarkable figure who was later witch-hunted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), painted a number of murals in the San Francisco area.

The work at the center of the current controversy depicts Washington as both a revolutionary war hero and a slaveholder. It points to the fact that America's Westward expansion came at the expense of the Native American population. Opponents of the murals claim the work “glorifies slavery, genocide, colonization, manifest destiny, white supremacy, oppression.” Professor Cherny has played a leading role in defending Arnautoff's murals.



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