

The Detroit Institute of Arts and the defense of culture in the US

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On Friday, the Socialist Equality Party is holding a demonstration outside the Detroit Institute of Arts, the first stage in the party's campaign to oppose the threatened sale of the museum's treasures.

In the days leading up to Friday's rally, the grave threat posed to the DIA by the corporate elite and the city's unelected emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, has come more fully to light. Nolan Finley, the editorial page editor of the *Detroit News* and a significant figure in the political-media establishment in Detroit, reported that government officials, including Orr himself, are determined to "monetize" at least a portion of the collection. The museum's director, Graham Beal, has warned that any such action would force the DIA to close.

What is taking place in Detroit is part of a national and international process. Cultural institutions, and the right of the working class to have access to culture, are under attack everywhere. Just this week, two other major cultural landmarks in the US headed toward collapse.

The New York City Opera confirmed Tuesday that it was filing for bankruptcy protection, canceling its upcoming season and planning to shut down its operations altogether. The 70-year-old "people's opera" was known for its efforts to make its performances accessible to the broadest possible audience. It has been in constant financial difficulties over the past decade and had to close its doors after failing to raise \$7 million last month.

Also Tuesday, Osmo Vänskä, the famed music director of the Minnesota Orchestra, announced that he was resigning after the orchestra's management rejected the latest offer of concessions from the musicians and then canceled a series of performances scheduled for Carnegie Hall in New York City. The

Minnesota Orchestra musicians have been locked out for over a year, with management demanding that they accept a pay cut of at least 25 percent.

If the Minnesota Orchestra continues to exist after Vänskä's departure, it will be as a much-diminished institution. Already, dozens of musicians have been forced to seek work elsewhere. Its fate will follow that of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, whose stature as a world-class orchestra was dealt a severe blow by management during a six-month strike in 2010-2011.

In each of these cases, and in countless others, the universal claim is that severe cuts in funding for culture and the arts is necessary because there is simply no money available. Such claims are patently absurd.

New York City's 70 billionaires, including its current mayor, Michael Bloomberg, have a combined wealth of some \$244 billion, or 34,857 times the opera's budget requirements. As for the Minnesota Orchestra, the board that is demanding that musicians accept steep pay cuts is filled with corporate executives and owners, including Marilyn Carlson Nelson. At number 118 on the Forbes 400 list of richest Americans, Nelson's net worth of \$3.9 billion could pay the entire operating budget of the orchestra for 130 years.

In an earlier period, going back to the American Revolution, the growth of American capitalism was associated with the expansion of culture and education. Funding for museums, libraries and public education expanded enormously in the aftermath of the Civil War and into the early part of the 20th Century.

While the robber barons of this earlier period were associated with the expansion of production, and saw culture and education as a necessary part of this, today's financial aristocracy has amassed its wealth through parasitism, fraud, speculation and deindustrialization. Fantastic sums have been

accumulated through the stock market, which, particularly since the collapse of 2008, has been heavily subsidized by the federal government and the Federal Reserve.

Detroit has been devastated in the process, transformed from the center of American, and, indeed, world manufacturing into the poorest large city in America. Today, the political representatives of the bourgeoisie, Democratic and Republican, from the Obama administration through to local governments and flunkies such as Orr, are all committed to making the working class pay for the crisis of the capitalist system.

It is the working class, the broad mass of the population, that must and will come to the defense of culture and all that is progressive in human society. It is its insistence on this principle, under conditions where pseudo-left politics dismisses the working class with contempt, that has made the SEP campaign to defend the DIA unique.

The SEP has rejected the position—advanced by the DIA’s director, Graham Beal, and others—that an appeal must be made to Orr and the bankruptcy courts to save the DIA. Not only does this accept the entire corporate-backed “restructuring” of Detroit, it is fatal to the DIA itself. Even if the museum were to remain open on such a basis, its broadly democratic appeal and accessibility to the general public would be destroyed.

We also reject the position, advanced by the trade unions and sections of the Democratic Party, that the sale of art is necessary because, in the infamous words of one union bureaucrat, “You can’t eat art.” In fact, the unions have assisted the corporations and the state in ripping up every right of the working class. Those who claim that art should be sacrificed for pensions or health care are engaged in the vilest political fraud. They are preparing the way for accepting the destruction of pensions and health care as well as culture.

There is a deep sentiment among workers to reject the entire framework of bankruptcy and attacks on social rights. There is a desire to fight to defend culture *and* education *and* pensions *and* health care, and to fight for the right to a decent-paying job. Polls show overwhelming opposition to Orr’s plans on all these fronts.

The SEP campaign is giving political expression and

leadership to this determination. We have insisted that securing the right to culture and all of the social rights of the working class is possible only through a political struggle against capitalism. This means a struggle against both parties of big business and the allies of the Democratic Party, including the unions.

The resources to ensure these rights must be found through the expropriation of the corporate and financial elite, the nationalization of the banks and major corporations, and the socialist reorganization of economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit.

The campaign has won a powerful initial response—from workers, students, artists and broader sections of the population. The demonstration Friday is only the beginning of a counteroffensive. We urge all readers of the WSWS to attend the demonstration on October 4 or send messages of support. For more information, visit defendthedia.org.



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