

Detroit Symphony musicians appeal for support as contract deadline approaches

Shannon Jones
28 August 2010

Members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) performed a free public concert Thursday at Campus Martius Park in downtown Detroit to reach out for community support as they resist massive and unprecedented concession demands by management.

Talks between DSO musicians and management broke off Friday without an agreement. No further talks are scheduled. In a statement to the press the players spokesman, cellist Haden McKay, said, "I don't feel any closer to a settlement. I think we've gone about as far as we can go." Orchestra members will meet Saturday to discuss the next step.

The 84 current players are being asked to accept a three-year agreement containing a 28 percent pay cut, a reduction in health care benefits, a permanent reduction in the size of the orchestra and other takeaways. The musicians gave up significant concessions in the previous agreement and many positions remain unfilled.

If no settlement is reached by the August 29 contract deadline, DSO management is threatening to implement a so-called Proposal B containing even more drastic concessions.

Management cites pressure from lenders, a decline in ticket sales, reduced private and corporate donations, and an eroding endowment to make the case that orchestra members must take cuts. Since the onset of the recession in 2008, the unrestricted portion of the DSO endowment has fallen almost 60 percent, from \$56.8 million to \$22.9 million. During the same period donations fell from \$14.5 million to \$10.5 million. Meanwhile, public funding has been virtually eliminated in the wake of enormous state budget deficits.

The crisis puts the survival of the DSO as a leading

US orchestra at stake. Currently the DSO ranks tenth in pay among major US orchestras. The proposed cuts will drop it to eighteenth or lower.

The American Federation of Musicians, the players union, is countering management demands with a proposal for somewhat less drastic pay cuts, with a significant portion of salary restored in the third year.

If no settlement is reached by the deadline, a strike is possible. The last strike by DSO members was in 1987, a twelve-week walkout, one of the longest for a US orchestra.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to DSO members and supporters at the free public concert at Campus Martius. Karl Pituch, the principal French horn player for the DSO, told the WSWs, "I came to the DSO from the Dallas symphony. I checked out the recordings and thought it was a great orchestra.

"It is a very stressful time. The meetings have been unproductive so far. We hope it is not a lack of respect on the part of management. It has been and still is more than a question of money. We are trying to retain our members."

Minka Cornelsen, wife of a DSO clarinetist, told the WSWs, "I played in the opera orchestra for 37 years. They are also having tremendous problems with funding. The Michigan Opera Theatre season was cut too.

"My husband has been with the DSO since 1970. Management is being very intimidating. It is not just the cuts. It's the way the musicians are being treated, with a sort of disdain, like a slave class. Unions are not popular; it is a corporate-run America.

"We wonder if we are being used as a test case. Is there a tacit agreement with other cities? Will they say 'look what they did in Detroit; we need to do that

here?”

She said the cuts being demanded by DSO management would have a severe impact on the quality of the orchestra. “We won’t be able to hire if we reach that level. There will be other cities paying twice as much at that point. People will be tempted to move, and if we can’t fill the vacancy when they do leave, that is what has us worried. There is already one person who is going to Cleveland.

“And accordingly the quality of the orchestra will drop. If you drop quality, you drop community expectations. Cleveland managed to keep their orchestra despite their financial condition. There are two or three institutions that make a town attractive. Here it is the DSO, the DIA (Detroit Institute of Arts) and the MOT(Michigan Opera Theatre)

“People move to Detroit from all over the world to play in this orchestra. There are many nationalities; there is a Chinese contingent, Poland, Eastern European. They move here with their families for the job. The auditions are very competitive. It is not easy to get in. There are usually two or three rounds. They play behind a screen. It is pretty fair; you don’t know if it is male or female, black, white, green, yellow. New players have one-year probation, and they have to be approved by a vote of the section they play with.

“We are on the radio; our CDs are heard around the world. The combination of the quality of the orchestra hall and one of the best orchestras mean that we in Detroit have the highest quality of music. It is a resource for everyone who lives here. It is the difference between us and Akron.”

Mike Keay came to the concert to support the musicians. “I support the members of this orchestra and I promised to come down here on my lunch break. This orchestra is important to the community. It is an important cultural resource. It should never come down to this.”

Tom Karson, who teaches in the labor studies department at Wayne State University, also came down to show his support for the musicians. He told the WSWS, “In my opinion what management is doing is regressive bargaining. By putting in a second ‘Plan B’ proposal they have another club— ‘If you don’t accept this we will do something even worse.’

“If a contract expires, management can implement its last best offer. But, legally, you can’t implement

something you haven’t bargained to impasse. The union hasn’t bargained proposal B.

“I think it is unfair. It is a tactic of hitting the orchestra when it is down. GM and Ford are on the rebound, they are socking away money, but they are taking advantage of the public perception that times are tough.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact