

Detroit Symphony Orchestra demands musicians accept huge cuts

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Faced with a multi-million dollar deficit, declining ticket sales and under pressure from its lenders, the management of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) is seeking draconian concessions from musicians, including a 28 percent wage cut, a reduction in health benefits and a freeze on pensions. The proposal would reduce the size of the orchestra from 96 full-time positions (of which only 84 are currently filled) to 82 in the first year, rising back to 84 in the third year.

The current contract expires August 29 with the next negotiating session set for August 27. Management says that if an agreement isn't reached by August 28, it will withdraw its current proposal and substitute another offer, Proposal B, containing even more drastic cuts.

Base pay for DSO musicians is currently \$104,650, ranking them 10th nationwide among major orchestras in base salary. Under management's current proposal base pay would drop to \$74,880 in the first year, rising to \$79,950 in the third year. Under Proposal B base pay would be cut to just \$70,200, rising to \$73,800 in the third year. This proposal would also eliminate tenure, allowing management to fire players at will, and impose a three-tier wage structure. These cuts would result in DSO's pay ranking dropping to 18th or lower.

Over the course of the past two contracts DSO members have surrendered \$3.4 million in concessions and have agreed to leave many positions unfilled.

The financial crisis facing the DSO is a particularly sharp expression of the squeeze facing orchestras and major art institutions across the United States. Public funding for the arts, never exceptionally generous, has been sharply reduced. Meanwhile, private donations have fallen. In the case of the DSO, General Motors and Chrysler, who long supplied a considerable portion of DSO funding, halted all contributions to the arts with

the onset of the recession in 2008.

Currently the DSO faces an operating deficit of more than \$5 million for 2010, following a \$3.8 million deficit in 2009.

Major orchestras across the US have eliminated concerts, cut pay and laid off performers. The Philadelphia Symphony narrowly avoided bankruptcy earlier this year and the New York Philharmonic is facing another huge deficit. The Honolulu symphony declared bankruptcy last year, canceling its 2009-2010 season, while musicians in a number of cities, including Baltimore, Seattle, Columbus, Ohio, and Raleigh, North Carolina, have recently taken pay cuts.

Kenneth Thompkins, a trombonist with the DSO for 13 years, told the press, "I have a family. I have a nine-year old, and I have responsibilities. I'm in the community. I go to church here. I own property. It's very stressful. If we go below a certain point, all the great players that are here now will have to consider leaving."

The DSO was founded in 1887 and has long been considered one of the premier US orchestras. It is noted for its superb concert hall and its extensive recordings. It performed the first symphonic concert to be broadcast by radio in 1922. Its concerts are a regular feature on National Public Radio.

Leonard Slatkin, the current DSO conductor, is world renowned, having led, in a career spanning more than 35 years, virtually every major orchestra in the US.

The 84 musicians currently working in the DSO are members of the American Federation of Musicians Local 5. For its part, the AFM has accepted management's position that there is no money, offering its own concession package totaling some \$9 million, including a 22 percent pay cut in base pay to \$82,000, rising to \$96,000 in the third year.

Haden McKay, a DSO cellist and one of the AFM negotiators, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Over the past year other orchestras around the country took minor cuts or even got raises. We have made cuts in the past, but when we have done that we got some restitution at the end. Now they are saying we are down for the count.”

He said the drastic cuts being proposed might lead to many talented performers leaving the DSO. “If we do get through this tunnel will there be an orchestra left? The musicians are the institution. If they start to leave it becomes a downward spiral.”

McKay spoke about the DSO funding problems: “There are three major ways the DSO has been clobbered. First, corporate contributions have been cut back. We were literally getting six figures from Ford, GM and Chrysler. After the bankruptcies we lost all that.

“Then the stock market crash in 2008 rippled through our corporate and private donors as well as impacting our endowment fund.

“Finally Detroit has had so many job losses, and that has affected our ticket sales.

“In Europe the model is a large amount of public funds go to support the arts. Here it has been private philanthropy, corporate or individual. Public funds are almost nothing—one third of one percent.

“There was a time in the 1980s and early ‘90s when there was some public money. The state arts fund in Michigan was pretty good as far as it went. A good chunk went to major institutions like the Detroit Institute of Arts and the DSO. That fund has now dwindled from \$25 million to \$1 million.”

Asked about what that reflected in terms of social priorities, McKay said, “If you look at the military budget, there is enormous waste, but Congress will spend a month fighting over \$1 million for the National Endowment for the Arts.”

If no agreement is reached by the contract deadline a strike is possible. Since the DSO regular concert season doesn’t start until the first week in October, a strike will have little immediate impact. However, DSO members have scheduled a series of free concerts in advance of the regular season to build public support for their cause, beginning with a noon concert August 26 in Campus Martius Park in downtown Detroit. Stagehands as well as several guest artists and

conductors are donating their services.

At stake are not only the livelihoods of scores of talented musicians but also the survival of an important cultural institution. DSO members are not responsible for the financial crisis and should not accept responsibility for paying for it. The surrender of further concessions will only set the stage for ever greater demands for sacrifice and set an example that will be followed by management at other major orchestras.



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