

Detroit Symphony musicians set October 4 strike date

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Musicians for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra say they will strike October 4, the day of the scheduled first rehearsal of the 2010-2011 season, after a mediated negotiating session on September 24 did not produce an agreement. Following the failure of talks, management declared an impasse and began implementing the terms of its final offer, including a 33 percent cut in base pay and drastic changes to work rules.

A strike would be the first by DSO musicians since 1987. The players union, Local 5 of the American Federation of Musicians, says it will picket Orchestra Hall October 4, starting at 10 a.m.

Management rebuffed the musicians' offer of a 22 percent pay cut and has refused to make a counteroffer. Under management's initial offer, Proposal A, base pay would drop to \$74,880 in the first year, rising to \$79,950 in the third year. When the players and management failed to reach an agreement by the August 29 contract deadline, the DSO withdrew Proposal A and substituted Proposal B, calling for even more drastic cuts. Due to a legal technicality the DSO could not implement its terms until after September 23.

Under Proposal B, base pay is being cut to just \$70,200, rising to \$73,800 in the third year. The proposal also eliminates tenure, allowing management to fire players at will, and imposes a multi-tier wage structure and work rule changes that would require players to perform additional tasks, such as giving chamber music concerts and lectures, without additional compensation. Under management's final terms, new players would earn just \$63,000. In addition, the DSO is proposing a permanent slashing of the size of the orchestra.

In a statement to the press, players' spokesman Haden McKay, a DSO cellist, said "It's a serious business, an open-ended strike. They don't seem to be

aiming for a settlement. If the board really doesn't understand what we're trying to say, it may last a long time."

McKay said, "The terms of Proposal B are so extreme that they will irreparably damage the quality of the orchestra."

According to a press release posted on the symphony musicians' web site, management has advised players that it is canceling all insurance, including life, medical and dental, even though musicians have offered to pay the premiums themselves. According to the press release, management has threatened "to sue the musicians to prevent them from publicizing benefit concerts and from telling their side of the story on their web site, detroitssymphonymusicians.org."

Symphony musicians have set concerts for October 10 and 24, which are aimed at building public support. The players had to cancel an October 3 concert after the guest conductor pulled out due to the impending strike. Musicians and guest artists are donating their time for the all performances.

The present crisis threatens the survival of the DSO as a leading US orchestra. The DSO has long been considered one of the America's finest musical ensembles and draws talent from all over the world.

The DSO is projecting a \$9 million loss this year. It says at that pace it will exhaust its \$23 million in cash reserves in less than three years. Due to the DSO's financial condition, lenders are refusing to refinance its debt on the Max M. Fisher Music Center, which costs the orchestra \$2 million a year.

The DSO is an important part of the cultural life of the Detroit area, providing a variety of music programs, including programs for inner-city children, under conditions where less than one-third of Detroit schools provide music education.

The attempt by management to resolve its funding crisis at the expense of musicians is socially destructive and can only lead to a drastic deterioration in its quality, not to mention enormous stress and hardship on the players. It is taking place amidst calls by Democratic Detroit Mayor David Bing for a drastic downsizing of the city, alongside an ongoing assault on every basic public service in Detroit, from education to fire protection to bus transportation.

The DSO, like other major US orchestras and arts institutions, receives virtually no public funding and depends almost entirely on private philanthropy for financing, since ticket sales cover only a fraction of operating costs. With the onset of the worldwide economic crisis in 2008, General Motors and Chrysler, which supplied a large part of DSO funding, halted contributions. After imposing drastic cuts on active workers and retirees the profits of the automakers have rebounded, but support for the arts has not.

With other symphonies across the United States, large and small, facing funding crises, the DSO contract is likely to set a precedent for pay cuts and downsizing. The New York Philharmonic reported a record \$4.6 million deficit last year and is projecting a \$4 million deficit for 2010. Earlier this year musicians for the Cleveland orchestra accepted a pay freeze and other concessions after a one-day strike.



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