

The Detroit News and the DSO strike

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In a column in the *Detroit News* Tuesday headlined “Cost of DSO too rich for Detroit,” associate business editor Daniel Howes lashes out at Detroit Symphony Orchestra players who went out on strike Monday, as well as Detroit-area residents and others who might support their struggle against DSO management’s draconian contract demands.

“It’s not too radical to say we’re past the economic point of asking whether Detroit as it’s traditionally defined can afford a world-class orchestra,” Howes writes. In other words, players and supporters need to face reality: It’s impossible for the City of Detroit—ravaged by unemployment and poverty—to sustain what Howes acknowledges to be “one of the state’s premier cultural gems.” Precisely who is responsible, however, for this state of affairs the *News* columnist chooses not to address.

Howes admits that DSO management’s demands for a 33 percent cut in base wage “would gut the quality of an ensemble desperately trying to stay in the top tier of American orchestras.” But basically, he says, that’s tough. Lkening the economic catastrophe besetting Detroit and the state of Michigan to a natural disaster out of the control of human beings, he argues that there is no alternative to accepting “the end of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra as we’ve known it.” We beg to differ.

One of the most important “financial realities” striking DSO musicians and the Detroit public need to face up to, according to Howes, is “the 21.3 percent decline in Michigan’s median income between 2000 and 2009.” What he conveniently fails to mention, however, is that while the vast majority of workers saw their wages and standard of living decline dramatically over the past decade, the super-rich were hauling in record sums on the backs of the suffering of ordinary Americans.

To bolster his argument that the DSO musicians

should accept the slashing of their wages and working conditions, and the destruction of the DSO as a world-renowned institution, Howes points to the experience of what he refers to as the “bankruptcy-scarred automakers.” But the auto industry emerging from the government bailout of GM and Chrysler is not a homogeneous mass of workers and management bearing similar scars and making equal sacrifices.

While many autoworkers have seen their wages and benefits cut in half, and tens of thousands of jobs have been eliminated, corporate executives are reaping record sums. A case in point is Daniel Akerson, the new CEO of General Motors, who will receive a \$1.7 million base salary this year, along with \$5.3 million in stock over three years and additional stock valued at \$2 million—a total of \$9 million.

Daniel Howes and his ilk would argue that such obscene levels of compensation are what the “market requires.” But while hundreds of millions in taxpayer dollars have been spent to fund casino gambling in Detroit and build sports stadiums, and corporations are given generous tax breaks to support their low-wage operations within the city limits, the population is supposed to accept without a protest that no money can be found to maintain the high standards of musicianship at the DSO, the country’s fourth oldest symphony orchestra.

In one of the more repugnant passages in his column, Howes attempts to turn public sympathy against the DSO players, writing that their strike will not “change the fact that people making more than \$100,000 a year don’t make a particularly sympathetic proletariat in a state where the median income is less than half that, the unemployment rate remains stubbornly north of 13 percent, and cities and towns are teetering near financial collapse.”

Such attempts to pit lower-paid workers against the DSO players are as cynical as they are despicable. First

of all, we might ask Howes and the *Detroit News*, skills for the auto companies and other corporate interests and inveterately hostile to workers in struggle: on which occasions have they ever found the proletariat “sympathetic”?

Moreover, and more importantly, the working population in Detroit has far more in common with orchestra musicians earning \$100,000 a year than with auto executives raking in tens of millions, or well-heeled columnists such as Howes.

The DSO players are not the first section of professionals to come under attack from the Detroit political establishment and media in the recent period. As Detroit’s public schools are starved for funds, teachers—subject to a relentless attack on their wages and working conditions—have been reviled as overpaid and selfish, placing their personal interests above the education of school children, etc.

While Howes and the *News* may think that the DSO players are an easier target due to their somewhat higher salaries, critically thinking working people will be suspicious of calls for “sacrifice” coming from the media and political establishment. After all, these are the people presiding over a failing economic system that is hammering every section of the working class, including the lowest-paid and most impoverished!

The DSO strike deserves broad popular support. The attack on the players is part of a broader assault on the working class involving not only workers’ wages, working conditions and benefits, but on the right of working people and youth to access art and culture as a basic social right.

In the Socialist Equality Party’s recently adopted program, “The Breakdown of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism in the United States,” we write, “Every man, woman and child is entitled to live and enjoy his or her life and develop his or her potential to the maximum, without the curse of poverty and material want.”

The right to culture—to attend concerts, to visit a museum or library—is one such basic social right. In a passage that relates directly to the current struggle of the DSO musicians, the SEP program notes, “Access to art and culture is a basic component of a healthy society. Yet, like everything else, it is under relentless attack.... The subordination of culture to the profit motive has led to an immense degeneration.”

The defense of culture comes into conflict with a social order that places the profits of a tiny minority above the rights of artists to a decent wage and the right of the public to enjoy the products of their labor. The arguments of the *Detroit News* and Daniel Howes should be recognized for what they are—part of the attack on the DSO players and the public’s right to hear their quality musicianship. Howes is attempting to make use of the crisis of a system he and the *News* represent and defend to justify a further lowering in living standards, as well as the cultural atmosphere.



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