Cleveland Orchestra musicians join striking DSO players for support concert

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Musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, on strike since October 4, played before a sellout crowd of 700 at a support concert October 24 at Christ Church Cranbrook in the Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills. The concert featured 17 members of the Cleveland Orchestra, who traveled to Detroit in a show of solidarity with DSO musicians.

The 84 musicians are taking a stand against draconian cuts they say would destroy the DSO as a leading US orchestra and set a precedent for further attacks on art and culture nationally and internationally.

DSO management forced the walkout by imposing its final contract terms, including a 33 percent pay cut, along with cuts in health care, pensions and drastic changes in work rules that would require musicians to perform all kinds of nonperformance related duties. New hires face a 42 percent pay reduction.

The musicians have offered their own pay cut of 22 percent in the first year, with a partial restoration in the third year. They say the steep cuts demanded by management would make it difficult to retain players or attract new talent, leading to a decline in the quality of the orchestra.

The DSO projects a $9 million deficit this year. The orchestra faces declining ticket sales, a fall in private and corporate donations and an eroding endowment. It is also under pressure from lenders.

The attack on the DSO musicians takes place within the context of devastating attacks on basic conditions of social life in Detroit. The city is already the poorest big city in the United States. The area has been devastated by mass layoffs in the auto industry. Scores of Detroit schools have been closed and bus transportation and other basic services cut back. Democratic Mayor Dave Bing has called for a drastic downsizing of the city, proposing to shut down whole sections of the city, cutting off services and forcing out residents.

While management, backed by corporate media outlets such as the *Detroit News*, claim that there is little public support for the musicians, the turnout at recent support concerts shows the opposite. An October 10 concert drew some 400 people and even more attended the October 24 event. The decision by members of the Cleveland Orchestra, one of the most respected orchestras in the United States, to participate in the concert demonstrates that the stand by the DSO musicians has struck a deep chord.

The first part of the program featured Antonio Vivaldi's Four Seasons, with four guest artists playing the solo violin parts: internationally acclaimed violinist and conductor Joseph Silverstein, Sarah Crocker of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Elayna Duitman of the Cleveland Orchestra and Kimberly Kaloyanides Kennedy, associate concertmaster of the DSO. All performers and guest artists donated their time.

Following the intermission members of the Cleveland Orchestra joined DSO musicians in a performance of Johannes Brahms' 2nd Symphony. Cleveland musicians received red roses in a show of appreciation for their support. The artists were greeted with a prolonged standing ovation.

WADL television, a local independent station, broadcast the concert live to viewers.

At the close of the concert Joseph Silverstein paid tribute to the DSO musicians, telling the audience, "I hadn't intended to speak, but I just wanted to say, this is an institution worth keeping."

Further support concerts are set for November 7 in Grosse Pointe Woods and November 21 in Bloomfield Hills.

DSO concertmaster Emmanuelle Boisvert told the WSWS that the guest soloists were chosen in order to

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feature former DSO musicians who had gone to other orchestras. “Sarah Crocker has been three seasons at the Metropolitan Opera. Elayna Duitman just moved to Cleveland in July.”

Speaking to the WSWS after her performance, Elayna Duitman told the WSWS, “I was with the DSO for eight years. I think what is happening is beyond belief. The musicians here have done a great job, being part of the community, volunteering, giving lessons; they are part of the fabric of the community. It is sad to see them being taken down.”

Asked her thoughts on what lay behind the attack on the DSO Elayna replied, “It’s corporate America. We are all workers here—we all work for a living.”

The WSWS spoke to bassists Marshall Hutchinson from the Detroit Symphony orchestra and Max Dimoff from the Cleveland Orchestra. Marshall expressed his appreciation for the support the DSO players were receiving. “We’re thankful to have our bassists willing to travel from Cleveland. We welcome and appreciate their support.”

Max added, “I have been watching what is happening to the DSO from afar, on Facebook and keeping tabs. It is similar to what is happening to orchestras around the country. I think they are trying to set a precedent.”

He spoke about the one-day strike by Cleveland musicians last January, which ended with the players accepting a two-year pay freeze. “They locked us into a contract that was not good,” he said.

Remarking on the importance of the symphony orchestra for the community, Max said, “Education is in the mission statement of the orchestra in Cleveland. It is the most important thing an orchestra does.”

Another member of the Cleveland Orchestra, principal violist Richard Waugh, told the WSWS, “I think what management is asking of musicians is obscene. I think it is false to say that they can’t afford it. If the DSO disappears it would be a disaster. Cleveland is no worse off than Detroit.

“It was one thing about the pay cuts, but it was also all the other things they wanted. They want to do away with any kind of job security. If you are constantly replacing players, there is no consistency in the orchestra. You have to have players who want to stay as a career. Otherwise the quality will deteriorate.”

He remarked on the evident wealth in Bloomfield Hills, the venue of the concert, and one of the richest communities in the US. “Driving through these neighborhoods, it looks like there is plenty of money.”

He dismissed the claims by the *Detroit News* in a recent column that the large turnout at the DSO support concerts did not reflect support for the strikers. “Not the people I talked to before the concert,” he commented. “It was unanimous in support of the players.”

The WSWS also spoke to a number of those in the audience. They expressed strong support for the players.

A retired art teacher told the WSWS, “I think the DSO is important for the community, it is a place to take kids to give them exposure to the arts. It may be their only chance to see a live orchestra.”

Gary Vaught, who works in human resources for local government, said he attended to show his support for the musicians. He told the WSWS, “It is absurd what they are doing. I think the turnout for this concert is important, because it gives the public an opportunity to hear what is going on.”

He added, “The kind of talent you have here in the DSO is hard to find.”

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