

Hollywood musicians express support for Detroit Symphony strikers

Marc Wells

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Members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra have been on strike since October 4 against management demands for deep cuts, as much as 40 percent, in their living standards and conditions. The players rightfully believe that the demands, if accepted, would mean the end of the orchestra as a world-class institution.

To this point, DSO management has been intransigent, while the local and national media for the most part has attempted to stir up resentment against the “overpaid” musicians who are daring to defy the concessions demands. These attempts have not made much of an impact on public opinion, rightfully suspicious of the “belt-tightening” efforts insisted upon by a wealthy elite that grows ever richer and more arrogant.

The WSWs recently spoke to a number of musicians in Hollywood, who expressed support for and solidarity with the DSO players.

Los Angeles-based Simone Sello, guitarist/producer and a reporter for Italian music magazine *Chitarre*, spoke with us.

Marc Wells: What are your thoughts about the proposed cuts at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra?

Simone Sello: At a personal level, this saddens me greatly. As a child, I enjoyed the recordings of the DSO. I had a vinyl of a Prokofiev piece, I thought their performance was so special. More broadly, as a musician, this reminds me of a trend I’ve seen too often lately: cuts in education are causing a decline in the overall cultural and artistic level. People are raised without being educated in the language of music. The DSO situation is of a piece with this horrible trend.

MW: This happens in the midst of a major economic crisis. How has this affected you?

SS: In the last two years, I’ve seen not only the disappearance of opportunities and prospects, but a 50 percent reduction in my living standards. This is not unusual. Until two years ago, I was still seeking artistic projects, doing experimental musical research. This research requires funds, which I now no longer have. Now the only search I do is limited to survival. Lack of funds has resulted in a decline in artistic endeavors.

MW: What’s the broader impact of such dramatic changes?

SS: I think what happens in the musical world is intimately connected and, in ways, subordinated to socio-economic transformations. A decline in government subsidies to the arts in the last two or three decades has had profound implications. Steady jobs have been cut. I’ve seen this in Italy with RAI [Italian state television], where the prestigious orchestras of the 1960s are now being replaced by improvised combinations on a precarious basis.

MW: Lately, work-for-hire [relinquishing authorship] and non-union jobs have dominated the scene. Clearly there’s no individual solution to this problem. What then?

SS: There’s no immediate solution. But I think what is needed is the growth of a certain type of consciousness that goes beyond borders. Capital is already scouring the world for cheaper orchestras, as evinced by film scores, while the national-based trade unions are impotent in the face of these trends. Global, international unity is required.

MW: On what type of perspective can this be implemented?

SS: There has to be a transformation of the social organization. These cuts are not the last we've seen—on the contrary. What's required is a way out of the current set-up.

Also, I don't think it's a question that can be addressed on the basis of a given category of workers, i.e., musicians. What's needed is the development of a social consciousness, I think. What I mean is that we need to look at this not just from the point of view of our own group, but from a class perspective. We all contribute to production, whether we are musicians, graphic artists, plumbers or autoworkers.

Los Angeles-based musician Fabrizio Grossi, bass player and producer, also spoke to the WSWS.

Marc Wells: What do you think of the proposed pay cuts for the DSO?

Fabrizio Grossi: It's troubling to me; however, I must confess it didn't surprise me. This is the type of treatment many workers in every country are subject to. I see it as two-fold.

It's an attack on our livelihood. But it's also something else. I view music as part of human culture. Art is so important. It's not just a way of expression, it also makes us think, makes us grow not just as individuals but as part of a bigger picture. The fact that symphonic musicians, the highest level in our category, are being attacked to me disrupts a crucial nerve. It's become intolerable to see millions being invested in the latest Lady Gagas able to generate profits while serious art that can enrich culture is greatly compromised.

MW: Do you think there are greater implications?

FG: As a musician I have a soft spot for the DSO, but this has been happening to all workers. This is a warning to all working people, whether musicians, waiters, autoworkers. The ruling classes have done a great job at splitting us on questions like nationality, religion or color. According to them, Chinese workers are taking our jobs! Those workers are not responsible for the problems at hand. It'll take more than just solidarity among musicians.

MW: Such as?

FG: I'm not an expert in history or political science. But my view is that we need to elevate the political discourse, engage in discussions, make "class" the focus of our consciousness. We are not enemies within the same class, on the contrary. The bass player in China is not my enemy just because he costs half of what I cost. We need to open that discussion and to have a leadership that's capable of uniting us. I'm not in the position to be that leadership, I feel under-qualified, but at the very least I think that's what the real issue is.

MW: A tiny portion of the world population has economic and political control.

FG: That elite is responsible for all sorts of splits among workers. I often hear Italian or American workers complain about Chinese workers. That's always a good opportunity for me to tell them that their enemy is not the Chinese worker, but the elite that makes unbelievable profits from this, plus it pits us against each other. It even sends us to war against each other in the name of what? Of course, in the US that takes the form of economic conscription, poor youth.

MW: Victims of economic need?

FG: Yes, like in many other countries. Last year at the NAMM [National Association of Music Merchants] show some 30 workers from a Korean musical instrument factory were demonstrating against subhuman working conditions. One of them lost half of his hand on the job. He was subsequently fired! These are real conditions of real people like us. They are victims of profit motive as much as we all are.



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