

ISSE and SEP hold meeting on Detroit Symphony strike at the University of Michigan

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The International Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party held a public meeting November 15 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to discuss the significance of the strike by Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) musicians. Students from the University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University attended the meeting, along with faculty, professionals and other members of the community.

Members of the DSO are in the seventh week of a strike against massive concession demands by management, including a 33 percent cut in wages, a 42 pay cut for new hires, reductions in health insurance and a freeze in pensions.

The meeting featured a talk by World Socialist Web Site arts editor David Walsh. Joseph Striplin, a violinist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, brought greetings to the event on behalf of the strikers. (See “DSO musicians hold spirited picket in week seven of strike”.)

Clement Daly, the president of the ISSE at Eastern Michigan University, introduced the speakers. He noted that the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS immediately recognized the importance of the strike by DSO musicians that began October 4.

“In the weeks that followed, the WSWS has dedicated more than a dozen articles, including interviews and video footage, to explaining the significance of the strike and to defending the musicians in their struggle. The familiar efforts have been made to pit lower-paid workers against the musicians, which echo past campaigns against auto workers with their ‘gold-plated benefits’ or the so-called ‘overpaid’ and ‘complacent’ public school

teachers. Such efforts should be rejected with contempt.”

He continued, “In its program, the SEP advances the idea that in a complex modern society such as ours, access to culture by the working population is a basic necessity. By virtue of this, access to culture is an inalienable social right—that is, it cannot be taken away, nor can it be ceded by those who possess it. We view the fight for socialism as inseparable from the defense of human culture. Furthermore, it is only through the establishment of socialism that human culture will expand and flourish.

“There is a long tradition in the Marxist movement of addressing issues of culture. Today, this tradition has culminated in the *World Socialist Web Site*—the Internet publication of the SEP. We are happy to have with us tonight David Walsh, the arts editor for the WSWS. Dave has written and lectured extensively on questions of art and culture and is a long standing member of the Socialist Equality Party.”

Daly then introduced veteran DSO violinist Joseph Striplin, who gave a brief summary of the issues involved in the strike.

Striplin, who joined the orchestra in 1972, explained that in the recent period the Detroit Symphony had experienced a decline in ticket sales while donations from wealthy individuals had fallen. He said the decision to construct a new music complex, the Max Fisher Music Center, had resulted in huge debts to the banks.

Striplin said that management had responded to the crisis with a solution that was now standard: “imposing radical cutbacks.” He said the model the DSO employed was the so-called “Memphis Plan” for

orchestras. It involved fewer concerts and forcing musicians to carry out non-performance related tasks, such as teaching and even clerical work.

“There is no other orchestra that has ever done this.”

He disputed claims by management that there was no money available. “There are 10 to 12 billionaires in Michigan and many millionaires.” He warned that if the proposed cuts went through there would be a “domino effect” for the arts.

In closing, he praised the coverage of the strike by the WSWS. “Your fine organization has been very helpful. I realize our struggle is part of a larger struggle.”

David Walsh, WSWS arts editor, gave the main report. He spoke about both the immediate issues involved in the strike by DSO musicians and the broader social and historical significance of the attack being waged against the players. Walsh stressed the need for the re-emergence of the socially engaged artist, a figure in short supply in recent decades. (See accompanying article)

A lively discussion followed Walsh’s presentation. Members of the audience raised questions concerning in particular the relation of various musical trends, popular and otherwise, to the broader development, and overall decline, of American society in recent decades.

In regard to the DSO strike itself there was discussion on the role of the unions. One SEP supporter noted that major unions, such as the United Auto Workers, have not lifted a finger to support the DSO strike, although, in the case of the UAW, they control vast financial assets.

This reporter interviewed several of those attending the meeting. Allison Richards, a visual arts student at the University of Michigan, filmed Walsh’s lecture. “I found the talk enlightening and informative. Music is something I have a passion for. I think it is something important to experience.”

She said she had not been aware of the strike until she read a leaflet about the meeting. “I had gone to the Detroit Symphony as a kid, so it touched me personally.

“I have always loved performing and being part of the arts. I don’t think it is something that should be cut back. It is vital, in my opinion.”

A member of the Detroit Choral Union said “I don’t think the orchestra members should take a 33 percent pay cut. All of a sudden Ford and GM are making

profits. Detroit needs this orchestra. Even though we have the Ann Arbor Symphony, we still need the DSO. It is a world-class orchestra.

“In Chicago and Los Angeles, the musicians are already making more than the DSO. In the larger scale of things, we are all being ripped off by the superrich.”



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