

A talk by WSWS arts editor David Walsh

The Detroit Symphony strike and the defense of culture in the US

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These remarks were delivered by WSWS arts editor David Walsh to a meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan on November 15.

The strike by members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, which began October 4, is a significant event. The immediate circumstances of the conflict are compelling and we will address them, but our more fundamental purpose tonight is to look at the strike in broader social and historical terms.

There is for us, first of all, the issue of defending culture against the current official assault in this country. The massive cuts demanded by the DSO management, which if implemented, would lower base pay for musicians to below what it was in 1975 (taking inflation into account), reveal the real attitude of the American ruling elite. If management has its way, the DSO will be destroyed as a major orchestra. That would be a blow to the cultural life in this area and this country.

The resistance of the DSO players, on the other hand, speaks to the growing opposition of wide layers of the working population, including professional workers, to efforts to make them pay for the historic crisis of this system. Trillions have been made available to the banks over the past several years, tens of billions for neo-colonial wars, but “there is no money,” we are told, for healthcare, education, and the social infrastructure, much less art and culture. The wealth of course exists in the society, but it is monopolized by a handful of people.

Furthermore, the dimensions of the attack on the Detroit musicians and the predicament in which they presently find themselves should help shed light on their objective social position. The DSO musicians today are being taught a harsh but valuable lesson: that they are in the same boat as millions of auto and other industrial workers, airline workers, teachers, government employees and more, who face wage concessions, the slashing or elimination of retirement and healthcare benefits, and the worsening of conditions at work.

The attack on the DSO takes place in the specific context of a nationwide crisis for cultural institutions of every kind. Public education is under attack by each level of government. Numerous library systems face cutbacks, closures or privatization. One third of museum directors in the US had taken pay cuts by October 2009, along with thousands of museum employees.

As the WSWS reported last month: Thirty-one state arts agencies predict decreases in funding for 2011. Arts appropriations at the state level have declined 34.7 percent in the past decade. When adjusted for inflation, the 10-year decrease is just over 45 percent.

The entire federal contribution to some 100,000 not-for-profit arts groups in fiscal year 2010—through the National Endowment for the Arts—added up to \$167.5 million (approximately 20 hours' worth of spending on the Afghanistan war). The NEA budget in 1978 was \$123

million, or \$427 million in current dollars. The 2010 figure, in other words, represents a 61 percent decrease, accounting for inflation, from the 1978 amount. In 2009, some 65 percent of arts organizations in the US had less than three months cash on hand.

These are catastrophic numbers, with no relief in sight—on the contrary.

Bearing the NEA figure in mind, let's consider the federal budget for 2010, which was \$3.55 trillion, including:

- \$663.7 billion for the Department of Defense (including Overseas Contingency Operations, i.e., “the global war on terror”).
- \$52.5 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- \$42.7 billion for the Department of Homeland Security.

That is already \$758.9 billion on the military and intelligence apparatus. (It is generally acknowledged that more than 50 percent of every tax dollar paid to the federal government goes to fund past, present, and future wars.)

The 2010 NEA budget of \$167.5 million, if my calculations are correct, was 0.0002 percent of that figure for the military and intelligence, two ten-thousandths of a percent. I think this would be a fair summation of the attitude of official American society toward artistic life—a shameful symptom of a diseased, dysfunctional social order. There are, of course, perennial calls for the elimination of the NEA altogether from the Republican right-wing. The NEA is a neutered agency, in any event, as the result of the controversies of the past two decades—its officials are terrified above all of attacks from the right.

For symphony orchestras in many cases, the situation is dire. Earlier this year, the Philadelphia Symphony faced the possibility of insolvency. The New York Philharmonic reported a record \$4.6 million deficit left over from last season and expected a similar shortfall in 2010.

In January, members of the Cleveland Symphony staged a one-day strike against a proposed 5 percent salary reduction. The final settlement froze wages for two years with a small increase in the third year. Meanwhile, members of the Seattle Symphony early in 2010 accepted a 5 percent pay cut through August. On top of that, the Seattle musicians agreed to “donate” \$2,010 apiece to the orchestra. The Honolulu Symphony declared bankruptcy in November 2009.

Pay cuts have also been imposed at symphony orchestras in Phoenix, Houston, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Baltimore, Atlanta, Virginia, North Carolina and Utah, among other cities and states. If the massive cuts proceed in Detroit, that will open the floodgates for similar demands by orchestra managements across the US.

The International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM) documents some of the cutbacks. One of its recent newsletters comments that “Orchestras around the country are facing pressure to accept concessions mid-term in their contracts.” The ICSOM refers to the

plight of musicians in Detroit, Florida, Fort Worth and Honolulu, and continues:

"Much more is at stake than compensation alone, as if that were not enough. Recent management proposals include abolishing tenure, freezing pensions, refusing to pay for electronic media services, severely reducing health insurance benefits, and redefining our jobs as orchestral musicians. Managers increasingly tout service exchange and service conversion as the next best thing since sliced bread, a cure all for orchestras' problems."

"Service conversion" or "service exchange" means musicians doing extra work for no extra pay, either teaching, coaching, or playing in small groups for schools or organizations, or even carrying out non-musical work. It is essentially part of a cheap-labor scheme.

As far as their 'social betters' are concerned, professional musicians, like auto workers, are mere servants, replaceable and disposable, to be compensated and treated in accordance with the immediate economic circumstances of the wealthy. This is the real situation, the actual relationship of forces, and it is best to be clear about this. The DSO players have every right to be outraged by their treatment, but it is not fundamentally a matter of the present management personnel at the DSO, as deplorable as its conduct may be. The full weight of the corporate, media and political establishment is on the side of the DSO and against the players. This is a social conflict, a conflict between opposed social, artistic, intellectual, and, if you like, moral interests.

I had the misfortune to listen to Anne Parsons, president of the DSO, at a press conference the first week of the strike in early October as she explained something of the history of the deficit. Parsons noted that various consultants and experts, including one from the Ford Foundation and others employed by the orchestra's creditors, numerous banks, had weighed in on the DSO's condition. They concluded collectively that the orchestra's financial position was "untenable," and that a fundamental restructuring was in order. Parsons noted that by 2009 the banks "were dissatisfied ... change was not coming fast enough." The consultants all demanded "drastically reducing orchestral costs." The banks treat the DSO as they treat Greece or Ireland.

The Detroit Symphony is considered one of the leading such orchestras in the US. One measurement of overall artistic endurance rates the DSO as sixth best in the country in terms of its performance level since 2004. I'll admit I'm in no position to judge. It is the fourth oldest symphony orchestra in the US, founded in 1914, and in 2009-10, the DSO was the tenth most generous in terms of base salary.

As we noted at the time of Parsons' comments, it is entirely unsurprising that the banks and other establishment institutions should insist that the DSO's problems be solved at the expense of its staff and musicians.

DSO oboist Shelley Heron has explained online that the orchestra had elaborated a strategic plan by late 2008 which had taken three years to complete, with the collaboration of the musicians and Music Director Leonard Slatkin. However, the economic disaster of September 2008 helped set different processes in motion.

In June 2009, at what Heron describes as a "fateful" DSO board meeting, "a presentation was made to our board of directors by Michael Walsh, Jesse Rosen (League of American Orchestras) and others about the need to redefine the orchestra in the wake of the economic downturn. They felt that everything had to be on the table from the ground up, and that while it would be very difficult for the musicians to accept, it would be a 'great adventure.' After that presentation, DSO CEO Anne Parsons said, 'We'll have to have a discussion and create a plan.'"

The League of American Orchestras is a management body spearheading the drive for cuts in pay and benefits across the US, in the name of "innovation." Michael Walsh, a former music critic at *Time* magazine and a contributor to the *National Review*, is a right-wing fanatic,

a ferocious anti-communist and someone implacably hostile to the working class and social progress. He circulates in the crowd that believes Barack Obama is a Marxist. That the DSO turned to such an individual for counsel provides some insight into the ideological and practical direction it was leaning.

Walsh's comment at the June 2009 board meeting "that everything had to be on the table from the ground up" should be treated with alarm. This is a threat.

In his keynote address to the League of American Orchestras National Conference in June 2010, Ben Cameron of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, used the same phrase after describing various cost-cutting and other "innovative" programs: "These are bold steps—but they are just the beginning. Everything now—programming, mission, concert structure, the very business model—must be on the table." Let's hope this doesn't turn out to be the mortuary table.

Now, when I argued earlier that DSO musicians were being treated no differently from the rest of the working population, I was not denigrating or slighting the level of skill at which the DSO players perform. On the contrary, this is something I—and I'm probably not alone—have come to appreciate more deeply as a result of the current strike.

We have interviewed DSO musicians who explained to us the grueling nature of the process through which leading orchestras select their members and the enormous effort and sacrifice required to remain at that high level. On the striking musicians' web site, trumpeter Bill Lucas posted a three-part series devoted to that question.

I will only cite one passage, that relates to an aspect of the audition process. Lucas explains that a candidate who applies for an orchestral opening is given a list of "portions of major symphonic works that present technical and artistic issues that a musician must conquer, rendering them from what most mortal musicians find to be difficult or even impossible, into sublime, pristine musical expressions.

"A list can contain 20, 30 or even more symphonic works from which many excerpts may be chosen. Audition lists are typically so exhaustive that it is logically impossible to play through all of the excerpts over several hours, but only over several days. As if that weren't enough, sight-reading can be expected at any audition and can be anything whatsoever, music that the candidate is expected to play as perfectly as if having practiced it for months. You can see then, that even for a seasoned pro who knows almost all of the music, it literally takes months to hone, polish and perfect an audition list."

Lucas also explains the expense and time involved in seeking such a position, the reasons why musicians struggle to join the finest ensembles, and under what conditions these ensembles can deteriorate and decline. Such an orchestra is clearly a delicate organism, which is susceptible to both economic and psychological pressure. The DSO management—with the backing of the banks and corporations and operating with all the finesse that the American ruling class is known for—has set to work on the orchestra with a hacksaw, which they term a "great adventure," and only the musicians and their supporters stand in its way.

The musicians' skill and experience represents a cultural achievement. The decline in the audience for classical music in the US is an indictment of American society—which does not provide serious, or often any, education in art and culture—and not the population. We are not 'privileging' classical music. Every kind of serious artistic endeavor should be publicly funded and supported, and the population allowed to select for itself what it finds pleasing.

As we have argued on previous occasions, music and art contribute to expanding our sensitivity to the human condition and our own psychological, and ultimately, social awareness. Such artistic efforts must encourage honesty with others and oneself, broadmindedness and depth of soul. An encounter with a serious work inevitably enriches the personality, and draws attention to the essential and most complex

questions in life.

As socialists we fight for the defense of everything valuable in humanity's accumulated material and spiritual cultural heritage, which is one of the principal bases for changing society and rebuilding life along the lines of solidarity.

It may surprise the DSO musicians that a socialist web site should take these questions so seriously. It shouldn't. Such surprise would simply reflect the degree to which various political impostors, including Stalinism and numerous anti-intellectual "radical" movements, have usurped the name of socialism and besmirched it. As Rosa Luxemburg, the great Polish-German revolutionist, once explained, "Socialism is not a bread and butter problem, but a cultural movement, a great and proud world-ideology."

The attacks on the DSO, as I suggested, should bring home to the musicians and the population at large certain truths about the value that the powers-that-be in this country place on art and culture. If that reality is genuinely grasped and absorbed, then it may become the starting-point for a development in the thinking and outlook of the musicians and other artists and professionals.

This is really what I want to concentrate on this evening, the need for the re-emergence of the socially engaged artist, the politically committed artist. These are terms that have been abused, and they can be misinterpreted. By such phrases we don't mean individuals who rush around from protest to protest, who are "activists" in the relatively cheap sense of the term. Nor are we seeking to revive the type of Western intellectual who hung around the environs of the Stalinist Communist Parties in their heyday, a 'friend' of the Soviet Union, who got his or her articles published, trips paid for, who received various privileges and perks for flattering "real existing socialism" in the Stalinist bloc in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

We mean something diametrically opposed to that. We have in mind the artist or intellectual who takes the social betterment of humanity as a guiding principle, and who works away at that problem with all his or her might. Someone who is not a friend of the establishment, who is prepared to accept the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, including exclusion from the limelight, in the pursuit of artistic and social truth. Someone who thinks deeply and feels deeply in words or sound or color—the artistic personality at its highest point. Such an individual inevitably opposes the existing order, in all its cruelty and exploitation, and a protest against existing conditions must enter into his or her work as an essential component.

Such figures have been in short supply in recent decades, but we are quite confident that they will emerge again. The situation cries out for it, and we are convinced a layer of artists will respond. The study of previous historical circumstances gives us confidence. Articulate and evolved artistic voices will be heard from.

When you consider the present situation in this society, which is recklessly attacking its own cultural and educational infrastructure ... how far we have come from the late 1950s and early 1960s! Of course, in the US there was never the type of government funding for the arts that has existed in Europe, although cutbacks are now taking place there too. The fate of the arts and the artists was dangerously tied to the fate of American philanthropists, corporations and the health of US capitalism as a whole. This has proven disastrous.

Nonetheless, half a century ago in this country there was a far higher degree of official support for and sanction of artistic projects. The figure of conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein is prominent in this history, and I think it is worth briefly considering his evolution. For those of my generation, Bernstein was the pre-eminent musical figure in American life.

A few facts about his life:

- Bernstein attended Harvard University; before graduating, he directed

and performed in a production of Marc Blitzstein's left-wing musical/opera "The Cradle Will Rock" in 1939.

• He was appointed to his first permanent conducting post in 1943, as Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic.

• Bernstein was a leading advocate of contemporary composers, particularly Aaron Copland. The two remained close friends for life.

• He functioned as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic from 1958 to 1969. Bernstein conducted orchestras and recorded around the world.

• He composed the score for the award-winning film "On the Waterfront" (1954) and incidental music for two Broadway plays: "Peter Pan" (1950) and "The Lark" (1955).

• Bernstein contributed to the Broadway musical stage. He collaborated on "On The Town" (1944) and "Wonderful Town" (1953). In conjunction with Richard Wilbur and Lillian Hellman and others, he wrote "Candide" (1956). In 1957 he collaborated on the renowned musical "West Side Story."

Bernstein was genuinely beloved by great numbers of Americans for his fifty-three Young People's Concerts, broadcast on CBS television from 1958 to 1972, in which he enthralled a concert hall audience of several thousand and a television audience of four million or more with popular, but not simplistic, explanations of the music of the great classical geniuses, along with jazz and other genres. For three of the years, the concerts were so popular that they were broadcast in prime time at 7:30 pm, something almost inconceivable today.

A sampling of the concert titles provides some of the flavor:

Berlioz Takes a Trip

A Birthday Tribute to Shostakovich

Fidelio: A Celebration of Life

Folk Music in the Concert Hall

Happy Birthday, Igor Stravinsky

Humor in Music

Jazz in the Concert Hall

The Latin American Spirit

Musical Atoms: A Study of Interval

Quiz Concert: How Musical Are You?

The Sound of an Orchestra

A Toast to Vienna

A Tribute to Sibelius

Two Ballet Birds [*Swan Lake* and *Firebird*]

What Does Music Mean?

What is a Concerto?

What is a Mode?

What is American Music?

What is Classical Music?

What is Impressionism?

What is Melody?

What is Orchestration?

What is Sonata Form?

What Makes Music Symphonic?

Who is Gustav Mahler?

Again, millions watched these presentations, which were lively and amusing, as well as informative. Many of the scripts are posted online. Here is an excerpt from the first program, broadcast in January 1958, "What Does Music Mean?":

"And the most wonderful thing of all is that there's no limit to the different kinds of feelings music can make you have. And some of those feelings are so special and so deep they can't even be described in words. You see, we can't always name the things we feel. Sometimes we can; we can say we feel joy, or pleasure, peacefulness, whatever, love, hate. But every once in a while we have feelings so deep and so special that we

have no words for them and that's where music is so marvelous; because music names them for us, only in notes instead of in words. It's all in the way music moves - we must never forget that music is movement, always going somewhere, shifting and changing, and flowing, from one note to another; and that movement can tell us more about the way we feel than a million words can."

This displays an extraordinary degree of sensitivity and humanity. To which people responded; both children and adults were deeply affected. What made this popular and profound work possible?

To step back a moment: all things being equal, the greatest artists tend to be intensely democratic and aware of the significance of their work in the life of a people, a country. In the twentieth century, the socialist movement and specifically the Russian Revolution exercised a large influence over the lives and thought of innumerable artists. Capitalism was identified by many of the best minds with world war, fascism, and depression.

America is supposed to be immune to socialism, yet many artists here had the same response. The greatest writers of the first half of the last century, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Richard Wright and others, associated themselves with socialism. This was also true for many visual artists, along with innumerable Hollywood and stage actors and figures in popular music.

This was the case as well with many of the greatest musical figures. Aaron Copland was a figure of the left, as was Samuel Barber. George Gershwin exhibited the most intense democratic sensibility in producing a work such as *Porgy and Bess*. Gershwin frequented left circles toward the end of his life, participating in various anti-Nazi rallies and supporting labor causes. Sen. Joseph McCarthy declared Gershwin's music "subversive" in 1953, years after his death.

Bernstein had an extensive history of left-wing activity and beliefs. Much of this has been concealed or unknown. A valuable book appeared last year—*Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician*, by Barry Seldes—that helped set the record straight. (The WSWS will shortly be posting a serious review of that work.)

Born in 1918, Bernstein was one of many artists of his generation who were radicalized by the traumatic events of the 1930s, including the devastation of the Great Depression and the coming to power of Hitler in Germany. Artists such as Bernstein looked to the USSR as a line of defense against fascist barbarism. Unfortunately, the Communist Party was a Stalinized organization by the 1930s and misdirected the social opposition of those intellectuals who gravitated around it into supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Bernstein considered himself a man of the political left. As early as 1939 he had written to his former piano teacher that he was "seriously committed to the 'proletariat.'" Around that time, when he was a student at Harvard, he came to the attention of the FBI, who opened a file on him. His left-wing activities continued through the war and into the postwar period. In the late 1940s, with the beginning of the Cold War and the purge of socialists from the entertainment industry and other prominent positions, further attention fell on Bernstein, already a prominent figure in music.

As one commentator notes, "Hollywood actors, directors and screenwriters were not the only victims of the Cold War anti-Communist purges in the entertainment industry. Prominent figures in the music industry were also targeted, including Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Lena Horne, Pete Seeger and Artie Shaw, all of whom were named publicly as suspected Communist sympathizers ... in 1950, in the infamous publication *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*."

Bernstein overnight became *persona non grata*. His music could not be played at overseas US government functions, following an order issued by President Harry Truman in 1950. He was blacklisted by CBS, the network

whose radio broadcasts had first brought him to the attention of a national audience. Truman's successor, Dwight Eisenhower, banned a performance of one of Bernstein's pieces at his inauguration in January 1953 because of the composer's link to left-wing causes.

Bernstein lived in fear for several years of being called to testify before the Congressional witch-hunters, as Aaron Copland was in May 1953. In the end, the authorities were satisfied with extracting from Bernstein a humiliating affidavit in which he expressed his loyalty to American capitalism and denied any subversive or unpatriotic opinions. This act of self-abasement permitted him to have a passport once more, and opened the door for his activities in the following years.

This is the real history of culture and music in this country, one of mistreatment and humiliation of the finest and most independent figures and the bitter experiences of those artists with repression, censorship and conformism.

Experiences such as Bernstein's and the virtual criminalization of left-wing thought in America with which his life was bound up help explain some of our current difficulties.

Fifty years ago, American capitalism retained its world domination, and regions such as this one, the industrial Midwest, enjoyed high levels of employment. Living standards were generally rising. Despite the anti-communist purges, a thriving and still generally confident official cultural life predominated in the US. Left-wing influence had not simply disappeared, in fact. And those who argued for support for the arts were embattled, but at least they spoke out boldly.

August Heckscher, grandson of a millionaire capitalist and philanthropist, was a prominent liberal in the 1950s and 1960s. He was the chief editorial writer at the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1952 to 1956 and John F. Kennedy chose him to be the coordinator of cultural matters at the White House in 1962; he went on to serve the Kennedy administration as special consultant on the arts.

In an appearance before Congress in 1961, during the initial hearings on establishing the National Endowment for the Arts, Heckscher was asked to name a budget figure for the new arts organization. Most of the others who testified proposed 10 to 25 million dollars. Heckscher suggested one billion dollars. When the Congressmen stopped guffawing, Heckscher commented, "If I were representing the Pentagon ... each of you would have taken that suggestion as seriously as I intended and there would have been no laughter." An evocative and telling moment, I think.

The poet Robert Frost appeared at Kennedy's inauguration. Believe it or not, prominent opera singers and classical pianists, as well as jazz greats, regularly appeared on television variety and late-night talk programs at the time. Bernstein's Young People's Concerts were a source of pride, but so was much of American popular music and jazz. For the first time, generations of working class youth, including black youth then engaged in the historic struggle for civil rights, had a little leisure time and knew some enjoyment of life; this helped produce Motown and other musical trends.

We are not indulging in nostalgia. This was hardly a golden age, the Kennedy administration was involved in conspiracy and militarism all over the globe. One simply has to mention the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and the growing military-CIA involvement in Vietnam. Nonetheless, the US establishment at that time was capable of tolerating and even supporting a serious cultural life.

The protracted economic and industrial decay of American capitalism over the past number of decades has been accompanied, and facilitated to some degree, by an intellectual and cultural decomposition.

As we noted in a comment on the WSWS last month: "American capitalism in decline has neither interest in, nor financial support to offer, artistic creation. In more prosperous times, the corporate elite felt there was a certain prestige value in subsidizing various educational and cultural activities. Now the aristocracy that rules the US views every

dollar not accruing to itself to be a waste and even something of an affront. Cultural life in America is in serious danger from the vandals who sit in boardrooms and legislative chambers.”

What is to be done?

As this presentation should make clear, we are far from viewing the Detroit Symphony strike as merely a trade union dispute. It raises complex social and political problems. The wealth exists in this country to fund the DSO and a hundred such orchestras. If the stranglehold that the financial aristocracy holds on American society were broken, all sorts of things would be possible ... and not simply subsidizing the Detroit Symphony.

This points to the need, in our view, to place the struggle for art and culture on a new basis. Applying pressure on Democratic Party politicians or appeals to the good will of corporate executives and billionaire philanthropists are worse than useless.

And economics, in any case, is not the only issue. Art is a threat to the status quo at this point. The ruling elite and its hangers-on in the media actively seek the intellectual and emotional shrinkage of the population. A people that is sensitive and vigilant and humane is the last thing they want. Cruelty and violence, for example, in popular music and films emerge from an ideological crisis and impasse, but they also serve to inure the population to the brutality of the US authorities at home and abroad. The rise of porno-sadism in films has its counterpart in the *actual*, not fictional, mistreatment of detainees and citizens in Iraq and Afghanistan, with further and worse atrocities to come.

Culture at the mercy of the rich, the corporations and two right-wing political parties ... the present situation is untenable. Art has to be funded by society. This is a mark of an advanced civilization. Today we are confronted by a revival of the aristocratic principle: art and education are provided, if they are provided at all, thanks to the benevolence of the fabulously rich—a Bill Gates or Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg. A disgusting and humiliating situation.

In conclusion: art cannot save itself. The only basis, in our view, for the successful defense of art and culture is the socialist struggle against capitalism and the coming to power of the working class on a program of extending and defending every progressive achievement of human culture.

Conditions of slump and recession, the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, now affect tens of millions in the US and vast numbers around the globe. It is estimated that some 80 to 100 million people in this country find it difficult or impossible to meet their elementary economic and health needs.

Artists—whether, like the musicians at the DSO, they come in for direct attack, or whether they simply find it impossible to remain indifferent to the conditions of the population around them—need to be inspired by the prospect of transforming and rebuilding society. The artistic personality is once again called upon to contribute to the cause of social revolution. The WSW, International Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party fight along those lines, and we urge you to participate in that fight.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:
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