

Strike by Detroit Symphony musicians at critical point

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3 December 2010

The strike by 84 musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) against massive concessions, now in its ninth week, has reached a critical point.

DSO musicians have shown principle and courage in standing up to management, the media, the corporate and political establishment in Detroit and nationally who are calling for unprecedented cuts that would effectively destroy the DSO as a top-ranked orchestra. The players have remained solid behind the strike in opposition to management's demand for a 33 percent pay cut and 42 percent cut in pay for new players, along with drastic changes in work rules.

It has become clear to many of the strikers that their fight is not merely a trade union struggle, but part of a broader defense of art and culture. Their stance has attracted national and international attention under conditions where art organizations across the US are facing funding cuts, with corporate donations falling and sharp reductions in already meager government support.

Attempts by the media to whip up public hostility against the players on the grounds that they are "overpaid" and "underworked" have fallen flat. A series of support concerts put on by the musicians have drawn large and appreciative crowds. Under conditions in which corporate CEOs, bankers and hedge fund operators pull in millions—or tens of millions of dollars—a year (or more!), wide layers of the population are not likely to be manipulated into outrage over the salaries of this group of skilled professional workers.

However, the strike faces serious dangers. Great financial and political pressure is being brought to bear on the striking musicians, who—with the holidays approaching—have been more than two months without

a paycheck, and only receive \$150 in weekly strike pay from the American Federation of Musicians.

Players' representatives last week turned down a derisory management offer, which added a token \$1 million overall increase to its original proposal. Management rejected a counteroffer offered by player representatives that contained further cuts on top of the huge 22 percent pay cut they have already offered.

DSO musicians should be under no illusions about the role of the high-level trade union officials and Democratic politicians, including Mark Gaffney, president of the Michigan AFL-CIO, and Democratic Senator Carl Levin, who have intervened in the negotiations. Whatever may be said for public consumption, the official labor movement—the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win Coalition—view the resistance of the DSO musicians with hostility and alarm.

After all, the AFL-CIO and UAW have presided over the slashing of wages and benefits for millions of workers, including a halving of wages for new hires in the auto industry. The well-paid, privileged union officials accept entirely the argument that the working population must "tighten its belt," even as Wall Street rolls in money.

For weeks the AFL-CIO and UAW said and did nothing to support the DSO strikers—no rallies, no mass pickets, no demonstrations—not even a leaflet to inform their own members of the issues. Now they have intervened in hopes of pressuring the players to accept a rotten deal along the general lines of management's original offer.

The union leaders want the strike ended on management's terms because they fear that if musicians succeed in beating back the worst of the cuts, it will encourage resistance by other sections of

workers and professionals to the general assault on wages and jobs.

As for the Democratic Party, the record is clear. In Detroit the Democratic establishment, headed by Mayor Dave Bing, has imposed pay cuts on city workers and overseen cuts to libraries, schools, recreation centers, bus service and fire protection. Bing has announced plans to shut down whole areas of the city, forcing residents out and cutting off utilities and services.

On the national level, the Obama administration intervened last year to force Chrysler and General Motors into bankruptcy, imposing in the process drastic cuts on active and retired autoworkers. Just this week millions of workers lost extended unemployment benefits due to the failure of Congress to pass an extension, while the Democrats haggle with the Republicans over terms of extending tax cuts for the rich.

To successfully pursue their struggle, musicians must seek to mobilize support from their real ally, the mass of working people. The WSWS urges the DSO musicians to consider reaching out to wider layers of the population in Detroit and other working class communities—especially the youth—with a series of “people’s concerts,” including free concerts, that would raise popular awareness of the issues at stake, as well as the level of appreciation for the skills and dedication of the DSO players.

The ultimate aim should be a struggle to unite every section of the working class—musicians, teachers, auto workers, city workers, young people—in a common fight to defend the right to a job, decent living standards, public education and access to culture. Such a struggle must be organized independently of the unions and the corporate-backed politicians.

Complex political and social questions are at issue. How are art and culture to be defended against government austerity measures and official indifference or hostility? As socialists, we insist that such a defense is bound up with a political fight against the capitalist profit system. Access to art and culture is a basic component of a healthy society and must be a social right, available to all regardless of income.

Billions of dollars must be made available to fund art schools, museums, libraries, orchestras and other artistic and cultural institutions. Decisions on subsidies

and grants for the arts must be taken out of the hands of the politicians and bureaucrats and placed under the control of committees of artists, musicians and other cultural workers.

This means ending the shameful dependence of orchestras, museums and other cultural institutions on corporate largess and individual benevolence. Players must oppose and refute all claims that there is no money for art and culture under conditions where corporations are posting record profits and executives’ bonuses are again on the rise. The wealth stolen from society through the machinations of the Wall Street swindlers and corporate CEOs must be expropriated and used to meet social needs.



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