

Detroit Symphony management rejects new offer

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After remaining silent for months, Democratic Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm and US Senator Carl Levin have publicly intervened in the strike by Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians, now in its 11th week, to help impose a concessions contract. Their proposed settlement would split the difference between the last offers by DSO management and the players, respectively.

Granholm and Levin proposed an overall \$36 million settlement package, \$2 million less than that proposed by the striking musicians, but more than the \$34 million on offer by the DSO board. Both packages would entail huge sacrifices on the part of musicians and endanger the orchestra. The previous three-year agreement amounted to \$48 million.

Players' representatives accepted the proposal, while DSO management rejected it out of hand. DSO Board Chairman Stanley Frankel said the \$36 million settlement "is beyond what every consultant and our board have said is feasible."

To date, the DSO has cancelled 40 concerts due to the strike, more than one third of the original season. Detroit Symphony musicians have won broad public backing for their struggle, holding nine support concerts that have attracted large and appreciative audiences. On December 12, management had to cancel a scheduled concert featuring the string group Bowfire after its members refused to cross the musicians' picket line.

The principled and courageous stand by DSO musicians has attracted national and international attention. The orchestra members recently received \$17,000 from musicians of the Montreal Symphony, and a number of other orchestras have donated amounts of \$10,000 or more.

DSO management forced a walkout by musicians October 4 by implementing a contract cutting starting pay by 33 percent, from \$104,650 to \$70,200 annually. It imposed even steeper cuts on new hires, who would be brought in at just \$63,000. Management's latest proposal would drop starting pay to \$77,900 if musicians agreed to perform non-concert-performance-related tasks, such as chamber music and education. Pay would be set at \$74,100 for those who opt out.

Musicians have offered their own cuts, 22 percent, with a partial restoration in the third year of the contract to \$96,600. They say the steep cuts demanded by management would make it impossible for the DSO to maintain its current status as one of the top US orchestras.

Granholm and Levin claim their proposal would lower starting pay for new orchestra members without creating a two-tier system. No details have been spelled out as to how this would be accomplished, but any such arrangement would sow the seeds for divisions between new and more senior musicians and further concessions.

In advancing their proposed settlement, Granholm and Levin noted the "extremely difficult" financial position facing the DSO. However, the Granholm administration has not proposed a single dime in additional public funding for the orchestra. Indeed, under the Democratic state government, funding for the arts has been slashed to the bone. The state of Michigan currently funds less than 1 percent of the DSO's operating budget.

The provocative refusal by the DSO board to consider the \$2 million in additional concessions agreed to by the musicians' representatives underscores its utter ruthlessness and lack of concern for the broader interests of the players and the community. It further

demonstrates the point made repeatedly by the *World Socialist Web Site*—the attack on DSO musicians is the spearhead of an assault on art and culture by a ruling elite that views financial support for institutions such as schools, museums, libraries and orchestras as an intolerable drain on profits.

The claim by DSO management that it is concerned with maintaining artistic excellence is a transparent lie. Those leading the attack on the musicians are business people for whom the financial bottom line, not artistic excellence, is the overwhelming concern.

Take James Nicholson, chairman emeritus of the DSO Board of Directors. Holding an MBA from the University of Chicago, he is president and CEO of PVS Chemicals. A director of the Republican leadership council, Nicholson has held highly compensated executive positions in the service of various banking and financial interests, including LaSalle Bank and North American Mortgage Company among many others. The Federal Election Commission reports Nicholson gave more than \$97,000 in political contributions in 2008, the largest single donation, \$28,500, going to the campaign of Republican presidential candidate John McCain.

DSO President and CEO Anne Parsons was hired by Nicholson. In a 2007 interview with *Crain's Detroit*, she confided that her early ambition had been a career on Wall Street, not music. "It had never in a million years occurred to me that music would be a career path," said Parsons. For his part, Nicholson praised Parsons as someone who had the "drive to have the [cash] drawer balance at the end of the day."

The defense of art and culture is incompatible with the continued domination of such people within an economic system that subordinates all social needs to the private accumulation of wealth. Access to culture must be a social right available to all. This requires the development of a socialist political movement of the working class independent of the Democratic and Republican establishment. Any reliance on or illusions in figures such as Granholm and Levin would be fatal.



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