Detroit Symphony strike now longest in orchestra's history

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The strike by musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO)—in its 13th week—is now the longest in the organization's history, surpassing a 12-week walkout in 1987.

Recent developments confirm that at stake is the survival of the DSO as a top-rated orchestra, or perhaps as an orchestra at all. Management is not merely seeking to extract draconian concessions from the players, but aims to impose a crushing and humiliating defeat.

DSO management, backed by powerful corporate interests in Detroit and nationally, wants to establish a precedent and intimidate artists, musicians and others across the US who might be inclined to stand up for the defense of art and culture.

Earlier this month DSO officials curtly dismissed a proposal advanced by outgoing Democratic Michigan governor Jennifer Granholm and US Senator Carl Levin. The proposal conceded a large portion of management's demands, imposing some $12 million in concessions on musicians compared to the previous three-year contract. Management made no counter-offer and seems prepared to sacrifice most, if not all, of the 2010-11 season.

Facing declining ticket sales, the erosion of its endowment and a drop in private and corporate contributions, the DSO is attempting to resolve its financial problems through a drastic downsizing of the orchestra, long one of the most highly regarded in the US. Management proposes to slash musicians' base pay by more than 30 percent, that of new hires by 42 percent, and reduce health and pension benefits.

In addition, the DSO is seeking changes in work rules that would fundamentally change the character of the orchestra, transforming it from a full-time professional organization to a group of essentially part-time musicians, burdened with all sorts of non-performance-related duties.

DSO management has attempted to camouflage this with talk of creating a "community of musicians," but the reality is that DSO players already carry out teaching and small group performances on their own. The DSO is insisting that these duties be added to each musician's regular work assignment, with no increase in pay.

Further, management is seeking to gut grievance and arbitration procedures, stripping musicians of what protection they have against arbitrary discipline and dismissal.

For their part, the 86 DSO musicians have resisted courageously, despite the hostility of the corporate media and political establishment. They have won considerable support from the public, as well as the backing of musicians across the US and internationally, who have made generous financial contributions.

Responding to the attacks on their conditions and their objective social position, the DSO musicians are beginning to turn out more broadly for support, recently staging a series of concerts at homeless shelters in Detroit. A group of string players has scheduled a free concert at the downtown Detroit YMCA for January 8. Another support concert featuring the full orchestra is set for January 15 at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Detroit.

A December 30 open letter to Michigan music educators—posted on the DSO musicians' website—from Robin Bloomberg, former director of orchestras for the Mona Shores Public Schools in western Michigan, calls on teachers to "align ourselves with the musicians of the DSO. Now is the time to be vocal, now is the time to offer support. All of our lives will be affected if this great arts institution is compromised."

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As the strike progresses, it becomes clearer to musicians and their supporters that their fight is part of a broader struggle in defense of art and culture. This is underscored by the recent Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing by the Louisville (Kentucky) Orchestra and the Chapter 7 liquidation of the Honolulu Symphony, which is ceasing operations after 110 years of existence.

The musicians in Louisville received their final paycheck in mid-December after management told a bankruptcy judge that it was no longer able to make the payroll. The court rejected a request by orchestra management that it be permitted to void its contract with the musicians' union temporarily while it reorganizes. Management wants to reduce the number of full-time orchestra positions from 71 to 55, with 16 part-time players filling in, for a total annual savings of $1 million, a change musicians say would inflict irreparable harm.

Louisville management is also asking for a 20 percent pay cut, which would reduce musicians' base pay to just $29,000 annually, not much above the official poverty line for a family of four. The Orchestra musicians have responded to the crisis by putting on a series of free concerts to build public support.

Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra musicians in Texas recently agreed to a reduction in the number of weeks for which they will be paid annually, resulting in a sharp drop in earnings. Management said the cuts were necessary because of falling ticket sales and a decline in public funding.

The WSWS welcomes the initiatives being taken by DSO musicians to reach out more broadly to the working class. Such a turn, however, requires an end to any illusions about the role of the Democratic Party politicians and trade union officials who have attempted to insert themselves into the negotiations.

During its time in office, the Granholm administration slashed funding for arts and education in Michigan while maintaining tax breaks for the rich. No Democratic politician at the local, state or national level has criticized the DSO management's stand, which amounts to little more than open strikebreaking.

Likewise, the official labor movement in Detroit is hostile to the struggle being waged by the musicians, maintaining a conspicuous silence on the DSO strike. The Detroit-based United Auto Workers, like the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO, has yet to post a single article on its web site. This should come as no surprise; these organizations long ago abandoned any struggle to defend the interests of workers, in favor of union-management collaboration. The UAW has helped impose even larger cuts for new-hires in the auto industry than those demanded by DSO management.

The struggle for art and culture today is bound up with the defense of all the social gains of the working class, now under attack. Official unemployment nationally stands at nearly 10 percent, with no sign of a let-up. In Detroit, where the real unemployment rate is near 50 percent, the Democratic Party administration of Mayor David Bing, a millionaire business executive, is seeking to shut down whole areas of the city, cutting off basic services and forcing residents to move out.

The DSO strike raises critical issues. It shows the incompatibility of serious cultural life with the continued existence of the crisis-ridden capitalist social order, where every decision is subordinated to the corporate drive for profit.

The dependence of orchestras, art museums and, increasingly, art education in the schools on private donations and the benevolence of the wealthy for their existence is intolerable. The claim that the resources do not exist to fund the arts is a ridiculous lie under conditions where American corporations are awash in cash.

Society's resources must be reallocated to adequately fund all basic social needs, including access to art and culture. This requires the independent political mobilization of the working class in the struggle for socialism.

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