Striking Detroit Symphony musicians to perform at free concert

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Musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), on strike since October 4, are set to perform a free community concert in Detroit on Saturday, January 8 as part of the effort to broaden public awareness and support for their struggle.

The event will be held at 3 pm at the Boll Family YMCA in downtown Detroit. It will feature a string quartet composed of Beatrice and Greg Staples, violin, Caroline Coade, viola, and Una O'Riordan, cello. The program will include the Mozart Quartet in A Major, K. 464, one of the "Haydn" string quartets; Borodin's Nocturne from Quartet No. 2 in D Major, featuring Una O'Riordan on cello; "The Mill" from the String Quartet Op. 192, No. 2 by Joachim Raff and Tango Por Una Cabeza by Carlos Gardel. In addition, musicians will give a short introduction to the works.

It follows a series of concerts performed by DSO musicians at Detroit homeless shelters, which received an enthusiastic response.

The full orchestra is set to play in another support concert on January 15 at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Detroit, near Orchestra Hall. The concert will feature the music of Rodgers and Hammerstein. The program is the same as one originally scheduled to be held by the DSO that day.

The strike by the DSO players, now in its 14th week, is the longest in the history of the orchestra. The musicians are resisting demands for pay cuts of more than 30 percent, 42 percent for new orchestra members, and steep cuts in pensions and health benefits. Proposed changes in work rules are aimed at downsizing the orchestra, turning musicians into part-time workers burdened with all kinds of non-performance-related tasks.

DSO violinist Joe Goldman, a spokesman for the striking musicians, told the WSWS that the concert at the YMCA in Detroit was a "continuation of the homeless tour. We want to show that we are important to the community, and that we can hold events like this without being under the auspices of the DSO."

Margaret Edwartowski, Program Director at Y Arts, spoke to the WSWS about the upcoming concert, "We're thrilled. A big goal of the YMCA is to bolster community arts programs. It is rare to have an opportunity to hear such fine talent at such a great price. We've already started getting calls."

Recent actions by management indicate that it is prepared to sacrifice the bulk or perhaps all of this season's concerts to inflict a humiliating defeat on the musicians. Last month the DSO rejected out of hand a deal, brokered by outgoing Michigan Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and US Senator Carl Levin, that slashed another $2 million from the proposal on offer to the musicians, who came into negotiations already prepared to accept steep cuts.

The implications of the dismantling of the Detroit Symphony, one of the top-rated US orchestras, has ramifications far beyond Detroit. DSO management, acting on behalf of major banks and corporations, is leading an attack on the arts that will be used as a precedent by other arts organizations all across the US. It takes place under conditions where art and culture is under attack at all levels.

A report last month in the *Detroit News* outlined the decimation of art and music programs at public schools in Michigan. Hardest hit have been the Detroit Public Schools, where only 40 percent, or 69 of 172 schools, have an art teacher and only 30 percent of schools have

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a music teacher. Just 10 years ago 80 percent of DPS schools had an art instructor.

The Detroit Public Schools were once known for their performing arts programs, which contributed to a vibrant cultural life in the city, the home of Motown. At one time every DPS student was required to audition for at least one performing arts program.

In the city of Southfield, located in the Detroit suburbs and long noted for the high quality of its public schools, only three of nine elementary schools now offer instrumental music. Another Detroit suburb, Birmingham, has lost 20 percent of its art teachers due to attrition over the last five years.

Shirley Woodson Reid, the former head of the DPS fine arts program, quoted by the *News*, called the lack of art and music in the schools "disastrous." She continued, "The arts are an initial way of communicating. Little children explain everything with their images and creations."

Kenneth Thompkins, DSO trombonist and a spokesman for the musicians, spoke to the WSWS about the cuts taking place in school arts programs. "The arts are so stimulating," he explained, "for young people in particular. These budget cuts are just so shortsighted, considering all the arts can do for young people. It takes a lot of discipline and concentration. Plus, it instills a love of things beautiful.

"If you listen to the rhetoric of these people [politicians], they say you need to be able to problem solve. But, that's what you do in the arts. It's not a hard connection to make. If you can sit down at the piano and work on a Beethoven sonata successfully, you can do many things successfully."

The claim by politicians and the big business media that there is no money for the arts is a transparent lie under conditions where Michigan corporations are posting record profits. DSO musicians should continue their efforts to widen their support in the working class and particularly among students and educators. Such an effort can become the catalyst for a broader offensive against the corporate driven assault on jobs and social programs.

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