

As talks resume: Detroit Symphony musicians' struggle in danger

Shannon Jones
21 January 2011

After 16 weeks on strike, talks have resumed under a news blackout between the union representing musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and management.

Union representatives and management met Thursday in their first face-to-face talks since late November. Last week both sides submitted proposals to a federal mediator based on a total compensation package of \$36 million over three years. According to reports, issues still in contention are related to work rules, including pay for community concerts and education, tenure, a two-tier wage structure for new musicians, health care and pensions.

The massive cuts under discussion represent a heavy blow, not just to DSO musicians but also to the arts and artists nationally and internationally. Under terms of the proposal by former Michigan governor Jennifer Granholm and Senator Carl Levin, which the musicians' union has accepted, overall compensation will be slashed by some 25 percent. While slightly less than the original 30 percent demanded by management, if accepted it would be an enormous setback that will have a deep and lasting impact on the cultural life of Detroit and set a benchmark for orchestra managements across the US.

This outcome is not due to the lack of courage and determination on the part of DSO musicians and their supporters. Musicians have waged a militant and united struggle for nearly four months. Their struggle, however, has been isolated by Metro Detroit AFL-CIO and the United Auto Workers union, which are opposed to any serious fight because they are in alliance with the same corporations and Democratic Party politicians demanding the downsizing of the orchestra.

The arts in the US are subordinated to the interests of the wealthy elite, who, after driving the economy into

the worst crisis since the Great Depression, are demanding massive cuts in every sphere of life from culture to education to wages and benefits.

This means the fight of the DSO musicians is essentially a political struggle against the entire economic and political set-up. These attacks cannot be defeated through isolated strikes, no matter how militant, but require a new leadership and perspective to unite the entire working class to defend its social rights, including access to the arts and music.

The DSO strike takes place under conditions where arts organizations across the United States face falling private donations and declining ticket sales. The Louisville Orchestra filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy in December and the Honolulu Symphony went into Chapter 7 liquidation. The Indianapolis Symphony ended the year with a \$2.7 million deficit following a \$2.8 million deficit in 2009. Musicians of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra have agreed to a reduction in the number of weeks they will be paid annually. The list goes on.

In the public schools, music and art instruction are being slashed to the bone. 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 a music teacher. Even the more affluent school district of Birmingham has lost 20 percent of its art teachers due to attrition over the last five years.

The gutting of the Detroit Symphony goes hand and hand with wholesale attacks on city residents. Detroit Democratic Mayor Dave Bing is advancing a proposal to shut down wide areas of the city, cutting off services and utilities to residents who will be forced to move out.

The strike has demonstrated certain basic truths. Musicians are part of the working class. They face the

same attacks as teachers, auto workers and every other section of the working population.

The strategy now being employed by the musicians' union of appeals to the Detroit City Council and auto executives, the very people responsible for the attacks on the working class, is worse than useless. The only viable strategy for the defense of the arts is to turn to the broad layers of working people who are being driven into struggle.

The DSO strike has revealed the lineup of social forces in America. Musicians face open enemies in the DSO board and the corporate media. No less determined in their opposition to the DSO musicians are the Democratic Party establishment and the major unions, who brought pressure to bear behind the scenes on musician representatives to accept massive concessions.

What is required is the development of an independent political movement uniting all sections of working people—artists, teachers, auto workers, city workers, transport workers, students, the unemployed, the entire working class—in defense of jobs, social services, decent living standards and access to culture. Such a movement must be independent of the Democratic Party and the trade unions.

The defense of the arts is bound up with a fight against the capitalist profit system. The limited funding and support for the arts that corporate America once made available is being severely slashed. Art, like funding for schools and health care, is being slashed by a corporate ruling elite that increasingly looks at all social spending as an intolerable drain on profits.

Art and culture must be freely available to all, regardless of income. As socialists, we say the arts must be freed from their demeaning and socially destructive dependence on private philanthropy. Billions of dollars must be made to fund cultural activities. The wealth stolen from society through the machinations of the banks and Wall Street must be confiscated and used to meet pressing social needs. Decisions on art and cultural activities must be taken out of the hands of corporate executives, politicians and bureaucrats and placed in the hands of committees of artists, musicians and cultural workers.

The WSWs encourages DSO musicians to consider the program of the Socialist Equality Party and make plans to attend the April 9-10 conference in Ann Arbor

“The Fight for Socialism Today.” (Click here for additional information).



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact