Detroit Symphony management steps up campaign for concessions with threat to cancel season

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Striking musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) are coming under immense pressure to accept major concessions, as symphony management holds over them the threat of canceling the entire season.

The executive committee of the DSO board of directors announced Wednesday morning, following its meeting at Orchestra Hall in downtown Detroit, that it was delaying by one week a decision as to whether the season's remaining concerts would be called off.

Management's ultimatum is intended to intimidate and frighten the musicians into accepting massive attacks on their living standards and working conditions.

Negotiations resumed January 20 for the first time since November. According to reports, the musicians' union and management have accepted the total compensation package of $36 million over three years, proposed by Senator Carl Levin (Democrat from Michigan) and former Governor Jennifer Granholm (also a Democrat) as a "compromise." In fact, it is no such thing, as the package includes serious cuts in wages and benefits.

The musicians' negotiators have already proposed cuts in salaries of 28 percent in the first year of the contract, with a recovery by the third year to 92 percent of what they currently earn.

Nonetheless, sharp differences between management and the musicians' bargaining committee remain. It is by no means clear that the differences can be overcome.

Supporters of the musicians' cause, organized in Save Our Symphony (SOS), held a picket outside Detroit's Orchestra Hall early Wednesday morning. Numerous strikers, and retired DSO members, were also on hand. Some 75 people were in attendance. The CEO of the Detroit Symphony, Anne Parsons, was greeted with a chorus of boos when she entered the building.

Musicians are increasingly bitter and angry over management's intransigence. One player described the previous day's meeting of the strikers as dominated by strong feelings, including "fear and rage." He indicated that the most recent offer by the DSO was "worse" than the previous ones. "They are going backward."

The players increasingly feel that management is out to destroy the orchestra as it is presently constituted, getting rid of "troublemakers" and replacing them with low-paid neophytes. Another player said, "The board's agenda includes getting rid of as many of us as possible."

A member of the support group SOS, retired Wayne State University philosophy professor William Stine and a DSO season subscriber, praised the musicians: "These are wonderful people. The DSO is a jewel. I taught at Wayne State for 41 years, and I experienced Detroit's decline first-hand."

Stine continued, "The DSO board is demanding that the musicians pay for their own fiscal irresponsibility. They got the orchestra into this mess. The board members couldn't scratch out a decent note between them. They are going to destroy this jewel."

The musicians have taken note of the fact that DSO music director Leonard Slatkin is scheduled to conduct a children's concert at Orchestra Hall February 20 at which Civic Orchestra, Civic Jazz and Honda "Power of Dreams" students will perform.

DSO players' spokesman Haden McKay told the WSWS: "They are using the children as human shields.

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Many of these students are our [musicians'] students and won't participate. Management wants to give the appearance that music is still going on here despite the strike. What they're doing is using them as human shields."

DSO management is demanding that musicians accept cuts of 30 to 40 percent in their incomes and benefits. The board members, multi-millionaires many of them, speak for the Detroit corporate and banking elite. Their campaign against the DSO players is part and parcel of the national and global attack on the conditions of working people.

Who are the DSO executive committee members who are making these arrogant demands? Here is a representative selection:

The chairman of the DSO board's executive committee is real estate developer Stanley Frankel, who heads Frankel Associates, a privately held commercial real estate development and management company founded by his father.

Another prominent member, and former DSO chairman, is James Nicholson, president and chief executive officer of PVS Chemicals, Inc., an international manufacturer, distributor and marketer of chemicals and environmental services. Before joining PVS in 1972, Nicholson held positions with the First National Bank of Chicago in London, England and Dublin, Ireland.

One of the hardliners, according to musicians, Nicholson told the media in December that "to build a sustainable model … there has to be significant sacrifice from everyone." How much has Mr. Nicholson, a millionaire many times over, sacrificed?

Another executive committee member is Lillian Bauder, a retired vice president of Masco Corporation, the consumer products and services giant. Bauder is also a member of the board of directors of DTE, the energy company notorious for its treatment of impoverished Detroit residents. Bauder sat on the board of Comerica Incorporated, the holding company of Comerica Bank from 1986 to 2010.

Another figure associated with DTE and who belongs to the DSO executive committee is Bruce D. Peterson. Peterson became senior vice president and general counsel at DTE in June 2002.

Alfred R. Glancy III, another executive committee member, functioned as CEO of Michigan Consolidated Gas Company from 1984-92 and MCN Energy Group from 1988-2001, and as a member of the DTE board from 2001-09. He also has banking and financial investment connections.

And where would a major institution in Detroit be without links to the auto industry? The DSO executive committee is graced by the presence of Lloyd E. Reuss, who served as an executive vice president of New Vehicles and Systems of General Motors Corporation from April 6, 1992 to January 1, 1993. Reuss served as president of General Motors Company from August 1, 1990 to April 6, 1992 and as president of General Motors Corporation from August 1, 1990 to January 1993. Reuss, also a director of the U.S. Sugar Corporation, retired from GM in 1993 after 36 years with the firm.

And so forth. Real estate developers, chemical manufacturers, energy and auto company executives, bankers … This is the ruthless corporate-financial aristocracy in the flesh.

Speaking for the entire ruling elite, the DSO executive committee is demanding that the musicians, whom it looks upon as servants, bend to its will. The DSO players should reject all concessions, pushed by the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO, and turn directly and forcefully to the broad layers of the working population. Any illusions in the "good will" of DSO management and its board of directors should be dispensed with at once. This is a fight to the finish.

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