

Detroit News continues its slanders against Detroit Symphony musicians

Shannon Jones
16 February 2011

A February 15 piece by op-ed columnist Robert Laurie appearing in the *Detroit News* online edition contains a vicious rant against striking musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, who are entering the 20th week of a strike against management demands for massive concessions.

The piece is merely the latest, although perhaps the foulest and most ignorant, attack on the musicians by the *News* which has parroted the line of the DSO board throughout the strike.

Facing declining ticket sales and falling private contributions, orchestra management imposed drastic cuts last October, including a 33 percent reduction in pay, 42 percent for new musicians and takeaways from pensions and health benefits. It also imposed changes in work rules that would transform the DSO into essentially a part-time orchestra with musicians forced to engage in all sorts of non-performance related duties.

The musicians union offered to take a 22 percent pay cut, which it has since said it is willing to increase, with a partial restoration in the third year. Musicians say the deep cuts demanded by management would do irreparable harm to the DSO, which has a well-deserved reputation as one of America's leading orchestras.

Negotiations are continuing past a management-imposed February 11 deadline for a decision on the cancellation of the balance of the 2010-11 concert season. While the DSO board has apparently agreed to increase slightly its pay offer, many issues remain outstanding, including management's demand for drastic work rule changes.

In his piece, entitled "Union greed: from the UAW to DSO," Laurie cites the deep poverty of Detroit—close to 50 percent real unemployment, an annual per capita income of just \$15,000 a year for those who are

employed—to argue that musicians should gratefully accept whatever management offers.

"It's not as if the average Detroiter will die if they don't hear Tchaikovsky's Winter Daydreams as the first snow flies," writes Laurie. "They're more concerned with keeping the heat on."

Later Laurie talks of DSO management confronting the "greed" and "entitlement mentality" of musicians.

To claim that the struggle to maintain a halfway decent level of compensation is an example of "greed" is absurd. The conditions in Detroit are horrific, but in what way are musicians responsible? The city is facing the impact of decades of downsizing and cost cutting by the auto industry, which after pocketing billions of dollars in profits off the sweat and blood of auto workers, has abandoned the city.

In any event, does Laurie have a difficulty keeping his heat on? Is he a champion of the low-paid and the poor? Hardly. He is an ultra-right, anti-communist fanatic. One of his fellow contributors at Biggovernment.com is Michael Walsh, who helped initiate the attack on the DSO musicians at a June 2009 board meeting, where he called for a complete remodeling of the orchestra in light of the economic crisis. Laurie's diatribe will be dismissed with contempt by anyone aware of American political and social reality.

Musicians, like the vast majority of the working population, face the impact of Detroit's decay, a product of the capitalist profit system, an irrational social order that subordinates the needs of society to the interests of a handful of billionaires.

Laurie, a reactionary philistine, cannot conceal his indifference to the fate of the DSO. Enormous damage has already been done to the orchestra, perhaps irreparable damage. The fact is the destruction of the

DSO would be a serious blow to art and culture, not just in Detroit but nationally and internationally. There is no doubt that the concessions imposed on DSO musicians will be copied by other major orchestras.

An annual salary of \$100,000 a year does not sound like an awful lot when you compare it to the multi-billion bonuses regularly pocketed by investment bankers, yet there is no suggestion by Laurie that they should be asked to sacrifice. The DSO musicians are highly trained and talented professionals, drawn from all over the world. Many started playing at a young age. Their contribution to society is infinitely greater than that of a hedge fund manager, commodity trader ... or right-wing blogger.

The claim that there is no money for a major symphony orchestra in Detroit or for that matter jobs and decent wages for workers is patently false. The corporate elite in Michigan are wealthier than ever. The Detroit suburb or Bloomfield Hills is the fourth wealthiest city in the United States. Nine Michigan residents made the *Forbes* list of the worlds 400 richest billionaires in 2010. Just one of those billionaires, Amway founder Richard DeVos, has a net worth of \$4.5 billion, more than 25 times the annual budget for the National Endowment for the Arts.

Many of those on the DSO board of directors are themselves multi-millionaires. Jim Nicholson, former DSO board president, is chairman and CEO of PVS Chemicals with annual sales of \$45 million. Other executives on the DSO board include former GM president Lloyd E. Reuss and former Masco Corporation vice president and current DTE Energy board member Lillian Bauder. In 2009 Bauder received \$163,914 in director's fess and stock awards from DTE and \$174,212 in 2008. During the same period DTE Energy imposed sharp rate increases while disconnecting service to hundreds of thousands of homes in southeast Michigan.

These individuals could pay for the DSO budget deficit out of their pockets.

The title of Laurie's piece creates the impression that the UAW and other unions are backing the DSO musicians. That is hardly the case. The unions long ago abandoned any struggle in defense of workers. None of the major union bodies in the area—the UAW, the Detroit Metro AFL-CIO, the Teamsters—has lifted a finger in defense of the musicians.

Contrary to the claim of Laurie that no one in Detroit is interested in the fate of the DSO, striking musicians have received an appreciative response from the public at the well-attended support concerts they have organized throughout the area, including at Detroit homeless shelters. Musicians across the United States and internationally have donated generously to support their struggle.

The strike by DSO musicians deserves the sympathy and support of all working people. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on musicians to reject all suggestion that they should shoulder the responsibility for the crisis of the DSO must take and continue to turn out to mobilize the widest support for their struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact