

Detroit Symphony management rejects binding arbitration

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In a Tuesday press release striking musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra report that DSO management has rejected their proposal of binding arbitration. Last week the musicians, who have been on strike since October 4, offered to return to work if management agreed to submit unresolved issues to a three-person arbitration panel.

According to Leonard Leibowitz, an attorney for the musicians, management wants arbitration to be limited to only noneconomic issues. “Even then they only said they would discuss the possibility of arbitration, not promise it,” he said.

The “response” by management to the musicians’ proposal amounts to little more than a call for unconditional surrender. DSO executives sent an email to musicians demanding:

- Musicians come back to work under the terms of management’s imposed “Proposal B,” (rejected by musicians before the start of the walkout), with a no-strike agreement.
- Once back to work with a no-strike agreement in place, the parties would meet with a mediator to discuss their differences, “yet for another time.”
- Only at some unspecified point in the future would the two sides discuss the “possibility” of having limited binding arbitration on a small number of issues, which would not include management’s financial offer.

The musicians union rejected management’s proposal, declaring that it did not represent “a workable alternative.” No further meetings are scheduled.

The DSO’s provocative rejection of the arbitration proposal leaves little room for doubt about management’s intentions. They are willing to see the orchestra destroyed before they will accept anything less than complete capitulation on the part of the musicians. DSO musicians are to be made an example that will then be used to tear up wages and working conditions for symphony musicians and all performing artists across the United States.

Management has been emboldened by the spinelessness of the official labor movement, which has offered little more than token support to the musicians in the face of the ruthless assault by management. The Detroit Metro AFL-CIO and the United Auto Workers, with tens of thousands of members in the Detroit area, have not made any serious effort to inform, let alone mobilize, their memberships in defense of the courageous stand being taken by the musicians.

DSO musicians struck last October against management demands for massive concessions, including a more than 30 percent pay cut, 42 percent for new musicians, cuts to insurance and pensions and changes in work rules. Under a model proposed by the League of American Orchestras, musicians could be assigned to all kinds of non-performance related duties for no additional pay.

From the outset, management refused to negotiate seriously. Musicians offered deep cuts, which DSO executives rejected. Each management proposal became worse. In February musicians unanimously voted down what management provocatively termed its “final offer.” DSO executives then declared

negotiations at an end and announced the suspension of the balance of the 2010-2011 concert season. In remarks to the press, DSO Vice president Paul Hogle indicated management planned to field a replacement orchestra.

DSO violinist Joe Goldman, a spokesman for the striking musicians, told the WWSWS, “There were no discussions with our attorney since a meeting last Friday afternoon in which management proposed something that is not even remotely close to what we were talking about.”

He said that musicians were now asking the full board of directors to call a meeting and vote to overrule their leadership and approve the proposal for binding arbitration. “The bylaws give the board the full authority to run the organization,” he said. “They delegate that authority to the officers, but they retain that right and responsibility.”

“Now we are in the 23rd week of our strike, I think this is one of the two or three longest strikes by any American orchestra in history. Many of our best musicians are leaving and we are going to have a very difficult time recruiting musicians of the same caliber. Contributions and ticket sales are going to be down for a long time. It’s disgraceful.”



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