An exchange on DSO strike with Detroit Metro AFL-CIO President Saundra Williams

Shannon Jones
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Dear Ms Williams:

The *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board asked that I reply to your e-mail of February 24 in which you criticize our coverage of the picket by striking musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra outside the State of the City speech at Orchestra Hall by Detroit Mayor David Bing. In particular, you object to our characterization of the role of the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO, of which you are the president.

In that article I noted the relatively small turnout at the picket—there were about 100 people present of whom a good proportion were striking musicians. The delegations mobilized by the Detroit Metro AFL-CIO were small and for the most part there were no identifying signs or banners.

I cited this fact to underscore a point that the WSWS has made repeatedly during the course of the Detroit Symphony strike: that the area unions—the Detroit Metro AFL-CIO in particular—have made virtually no effort to publicize the cause of the musicians or mobilize significant numbers of their members behind the strikers. Under conditions where the big business media and the political and corporate establishment have lined up against the musicians, this means to work for the isolation and defeat of their strike.

You write that you are "appalled" by my remarks and insist that your organization has "supported the Musicians since day one." You then defensively cite a number of actions you have taken personally on behalf of the DSO musicians.

Among other things you inform us that you have made a personal monetary donation to the musicians; walked their picket lines; spent union funds to hire an attorney; written letters to the DSO management; offered musicians the help of the federation's media specialist; hired a Detroit Federation of Musician (DFM) pianist to play at your home (!); contacted UAW President Bob King; and even permitted the local DFM president to present information to your executive board.

Do you expect anyone to take this seriously? It is clear from this that your idea of strike support has more to do with noblesse oblige than working class solidarity. In the past, a wealthy liberal philanthropist might have written such a letter, but not an official of an organization claiming to have something to do with defending the working class.

You are the head of an organization, the Detroit Metro AFL-CIO, which allegedly represents tens of thousands of workers employed at some of the most vital production and service facilities in the region. With an affiliate facing all-out assault by a ruthless management backed by a hostile corporate media, what concrete actions have you initiated in their defense? The answer is none. No mass demonstrations, no mass pickets, no sympathy strikes. In fact, the attack on the DSO musicians has evoked virtually no reaction from your organization, further testimony to the worthlessness of the existing union structures.

Let's review the record. The DSO musicians are engaged in a life-and-death struggle. They are now in the 22nd week of a strike against devastating concessions demands by management, including a more than 30 percent pay cut, 42 percent for new musicians and provocative changes to work rules.

The musicians responded by establishing their own web

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site and organizing a series of well-attended support concerts. At one concert more than a dozen musicians from the Cleveland Orchestra played in a show of solidarity. DSO musicians picketed and leafleted events at Orchestra Hall, forcing the cancellation of a number of performances.

Meanwhile, the Detroit Metro AFL-CIO, not to mention other major unions headquartered in Detroit, such as the United Auto Workers, stood by with folded arms. There were no public statements of support, no leaflets, not even an online posting. Metro Detroit AFL-CIO officials, including yourself, did not speak at any of the strike support concerts.

As the strike continued, it became clear that management was becoming more intransigent. In December DSO negotiators rejected a "compromise" proposal, which would have been bad enough for the musicians, brokered by outgoing Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm and US Senator Carl Levin.

Negotiations resumed in January, but the employers were not interested in a settlement. The strike was now the longest in DSO history, but each management offer was worse than the last. Finally, DSO officials issued an ultimatum threatening to cancel the balance of the 2010-2011 season unless musicians accepted a final offer containing new, outrageous concessions demands. When musicians unanimously rejected that offer, a top DSO official told a *Detroit News* reporter that management was through negotiating and suggested the DSO now planned to field a scab, replacement orchestra.

In response to this the musicians called for a picket of Orchestra Hall, where Mayor Bing planned to give his State of the City speech—a clear act of strikebreaking on the part of Democratic Party city officials. The Detroit Metro AFL-CIO finally ended its public silence, releasing a press statement calling for support for the musicians' picket. However, the vast majority of workers in the Detroit area were not even aware of the call, which was not publicized by e-mail until the day of the picket. In any event, only a few dozen workers, besides musicians, turned out, an abysmal showing given that there are some 312,000 union members in the greater Detroit area (unionstat.com). The fault lies not with the working class population, but with your organization.

The United Auto Workers, with international headquarters located in Detroit, apparently did not bother sending any ranking official, let alone organize a rank-and-file contingent. It is hardly surprising that the UAW would not want to encourage musicians resisting a 30-40 percent pay cut when it is attempting to impose, without a vote, a 50 percent cut in pay on workers at the General Motors Lake Orion plant and has already imposed a 50 percent pay cut on new-hires.

What is involved here is the abandonment by what is called the "labor movement" of all the past traditions of struggle. Strike activity is at its lowest level in history under conditions of the greatest offensive against workers' jobs and living conditions since the 1930s. The response of the unions to the outbreak of mass protests in Wisconsin has been to agree to all the cuts demanded by Governor Scott Walker as long as the union structure, including the automatic dues checkoff, is retained.

One of the dangers facing DSO musicians is their inadequate awareness of the causes and implications of the degeneration of the official labor movement in the US over the course of the past several decades. As bitter experience has demonstrated, the interests of workers cannot be defended within the framework of the existing union organizations, based on union-management collaboration and defense of the capitalist profit system. What confronts the working class is the necessity for a new perspective and new organizations of struggle, above all the building of a mass political movement based on a socialist program.

Shannon Jones, *World Socialist Web Site*

For the text of the e-mail from Saundra Williams click here.

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