

Tentative contract agreement in strike by DSO musicians

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Spokesmen for striking Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians reported a tentative agreement with management Monday after a weekend long bargaining session. DSO musicians met the same day to get details of the settlement. According to union rules no vote can take place for 72 hours.

Members of the negotiating committee, which is recommending ratification, would not provide any details of the agreement before the vote. There is no doubt, however, the contract contains steep pay cuts and other concessions.

The negotiations were the first since February when musicians rejected what management termed its “final offer.” The resumed talks included a federal mediator as well as Matt Cullen, president and chief operating officer of Rock Enterprises, a leading Detroit real estate developer.

The reported settlement comes on the six-month anniversary of the walkout by DSO musicians October 4. It is now one of the longest strikes by symphony musicians in US history. Musicians struck after rejecting drastic concession demands by management, including a more than 30 percent cut in pay, 42 percent for new musicians, cuts in insurance and changes in work rules. Management insisted the cuts were necessary because of the dire financial position of the orchestra, which has suffered a huge decline in its endowment as well as declining donations and ticket sales.

The musicians union accepted the premise that musicians had to accept significant cuts, offering a 22 percent pay reduction, with a partial restoration in the third year of the contract. Musicians resisted the steeper cuts demanded by management, warning that it would be impossible to attract and retain highly skilled musicians, leading to an erosion in the quality of the

DSO, which is ranked as one the finest US orchestras.

Outstanding issues reportedly centered on management’s proposal for “community outreach” as well as the size of the partial pay restoration in the third year. The changes in work rules proposed by management would convert the DSO into essentially a part-time orchestra with musicians burdened with all kinds of non-concert performance related duties.

Arrayed against the musicians from the start of their struggle was the entire corporate and political establishment as well as the big business media, which did little to disguise its hostility to the courageous stand taken by the musicians, presenting them as “overpaid” and out of touch with the “reality” of Detroit.

The strike took place in the context of a wholesale assault on the jobs, wages and social programs of working people across the United States. Leading the assault on DSO musicians was the same wealthy elite that has overseen the dismantling of Detroit, once an industrial powerhouse and now the poorest big city in America.

The struggle by DSO musicians was in essence a fight to defend art and culture against a ruling elite that increasingly views expenditures on art museums, libraries, orchestras and schools as a needless drain on profits. Such a struggle could not be successful if limited to a trade union form or based on appeals to the Democratic Party or corporate executives. This attack could only be answered through mobilizing the working class.

Despite the DSO musicians’ determined efforts to mobilize public support for their strike by organizing community concerts, their struggle was undermined and isolated by the United Auto Workers and other major unions in the area, which did nothing to mobilize the working class. There were no sympathy strikes, no

mass demonstrations or pickets, not even a press conference. The complete inaction of the AFL-CIO only confirmed its bankruptcy and worthlessness.

Under these conditions the outcome of the strike could be nothing else than a serious setback that will be used as a precedent for attacks on musicians across the United States. The defense of art and culture is the task of the working class, but this requires new leadership and new organizations. This means breaking with the Democrats and Republicans and taking up a conscious struggle against the capitalist profit system.



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