

# Louisville Orchestra to hire replacement musicians

Naomi Spencer  
14 April 2012

After a year-and-a-half-long struggle by musicians against layoffs and other cuts to the Louisville Orchestra, the orchestra's management board announced Thursday that it would begin hiring replacement musicians this month.

Orchestra board CEO Robert Birman announced that in hiring new musicians, "the goal would be to have an orchestra by September." "We declared that negotiations were over a long time ago," he added.

The Louisville Orchestra Musicians' Association (LOMA) has requested simply that musicians and management work with an arbitrator with industry experience. Birman dismissed the proposal with utter contempt. "That is not something that is even an option for us to consider where an outside consultant would have authority over a board of directors," he told the *Louisville Courier Journal*. "That's absolutely ludicrous to us."

The musicians' union has asked that the board communicate directly, rather than through a lawyer. The last meeting between players and management was in November of last year, when talks broke down.

Also on Thursday, LOMA announced that it was in talks with the board over a one-year "bridge" contract that Louisville Metro Council President Jim King was brokering. Birman dismissed the claim, calling it "game playing." "We are not in negotiations with the musicians," he told the *Courier Journal*. "There is no agreement, and without an agreement the board will move forward with hiring [replacement] musicians."

The Louisville Orchestra is an internationally known symphony orchestra, and has been playing full-time since 1937. It is regarded as the cornerstone of the city's cultural life, and acts as the resident orchestra for the Louisville Ballet and the Kentucky Opera.

The state offers very little in governmental support

for the arts; the Kentucky Arts Council in 2011 awarded a derisory \$1.6 million to be split up among 20 Louisville area arts organizations, including the orchestra, the state's only art museum, the actors theatre and the city ballet troupe.

Because of the paltry governmental funding, arts organizations are highly dependent upon private philanthropy and corporate donations. As a result, direction of cultural projects is overwhelmingly dominated by financial considerations. With a 40-member board of directors consisting largely of multi-millionaire former executives and lobbyists, the Louisville Orchestra is especially hamstrung by the city's wealthy elite.

The orchestra has reeled from crisis to crisis for years, filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2010, citing the poor economy and a drop in charitable donations. In August of 2010, the musicians agreed to concessions totaling \$100,000 to go toward closing a quarter-million-dollar budget gap.

After that giveback, the management board raised its budget deficit estimate to \$2 million and immediately demanded deeper cuts, including a 20 percent pay cut and the reduction of the 71-piece orchestra to 55 positions. Musicians objected, saying that such reductions would cripple them both economically and artistically, and render the Louisville Orchestra unrecognizable.

Last week, management set a pre-condition for future contracts that no more than 55 musicians be salaried for 30 weeks per year and that base salary be no more than \$925 per week, including medical and pension costs. This would reduce total pre-tax compensation to less than \$28,000 per year—far below the national average for professional orchestra musicians, and low enough to qualify for welfare assistance in the state of Kentucky.

The crisis in Louisville has paralleled those unfolding in cities throughout the US. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra went out on strike in October 2010 after management demanded pay cuts of 30 percent and other concessions. The DSO returned to work in April 2011 with salaries slashed by one-quarter and the size of the orchestra reduced from 96 to 85 positions. That same month, the Philadelphia Orchestra filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, its executive board demanding a 16 percent cut in musicians' pay. In January, New York City Opera musicians and singers were subjected to a lockout in retaliation for their opposition to similar attacks. Over the past two years, symphony orchestras in Honolulu, Syracuse, New York and elsewhere have shut down.

The Louisville musicians have seen an outpouring of support from classical music professionals and the general public. An online petition created by LOMA that calls for management to meet with an industry arbitrator has gathered 6,500 signatures, and the union's Facebook page has been filled with angry and impassioned statements in defense of the musicians.

A letter published in the *Courier Journal* April 7, from Wellington, New Zealand cellist David Chickering, for example, appealed for Louisville residents to support the musicians. "I live on the other side of the world now and am the associate principal cellist with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. But I have played with professional orchestras in Milwaukee, Syracuse and Chicago. You have a fine orchestra in Louisville. Support them and be blessed by the great music you hear."

Other letters draw connections between the attacks on the musicians and the grievances expressed by the protesters in the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations. Charles Baker of Louisville writes, "OWS has made it clear that the American economic system is being held hostage by a few members of the corporate elite... The board of the LO consists of 40-plus members of the city's elite. As a community non-profit, the board holds hostage our city's orchestral music. They write their own rules, locking out the musicians and imperiously refusing to enter into honest negotiations... Everywhere we look, it's the 1 percent versus the rest of us. It's time to speak up."

Another letter writer declares, "The Louisville Orchestra CEO and his sycophant board members

should resign immediately. They have done enough damage. CEO Robert Birman and staff continue to collect salaries for preventing performances instead of producing them. That funds meant to produce concerts are being diverted to corporate welfare is an outrage."

The volume of public indignation prompted the paper to issue an editorial April 7 ("Louisville Orchestra keeps slipping away"), noting, "Musically, there has been an eerie silence in Louisville for the last year. The opera sang to harpsichords and pianos. There were no Making Music Concerts, for the first time in more than half a century." The paper cautioned the orchestra management that its "'our way or the highway' approach is wearing thin," adding, "treating the players as if they were peasants banging at the gates of the czar's palace does nothing to advance the arts in this community."

On the LOMA Facebook page, supporters and musicians issue statements that go far further than the mild requests of the union that management return to the negotiating table. "It's the management that should be going. Keep the musicians," writes one supporter. "What makes people think management will do any better with another group of musicians?"

Another supporter suggests, "The ONLY solution at this point is for the Louisville community to come together and open their pockets, establish a new board—and a totally new organization—run by the MUSICIANS! Let the old board and CEO just sit in an empty building with no orchestra, no big salary, just a big NOTHING—while the real musicians of the Louisville Symphony give themselves a new name and go back to doing what they love."



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**