

Chicago Symphony musicians walk out

Kristina Betinis
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On Saturday, over one hundred Chicago Symphony Orchestra players rejected the Orchestra Association's final offer of a three-year concessions contract. The players formed picket lines outside of Orchestra Hall ahead of a scheduled evening performance.

This is the first strike at the CSO in more than twenty years. In 1991, Chicago Symphony musicians were on strike for three weeks.

The players' contract expired September 16, and negotiations for a new contract took place throughout the summer months.

The issues in the strike center on musicians' wages and health care costs. The Association is insisting on a seven percentage point increase in employee health care costs, from five percent to 12 percent (more than doubling what musicians have to pay). This would far outstrip the proposed pay raises for the years spanned by the contract, in effect cutting the orchestra's pay.

Cellist David Sanders, a member of the CSO musicians' negotiating committee, told the *Chicago Classical Review* that the players had made concessions in past and current contracts, but that management kept coming back for more. "They're asking for major concessions," said Sanders on the picket line Saturday. "It's thousands of dollars in givebacks. We spent weeks [negotiating and] giving them everything they asked for, and they continue to take away and take away and take away."

Deborah Rutter, president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association, referred to the austerity policies being implemented all over the country, commenting, "They're doing very well by what the national standard is."

Earlier this year, Rutter announced a record-breaking year of fundraising for the CSO, whose contributions increased 15 percent to \$24 million.

According to a national study of 2008-09 orchestra budgets, 42 percent of total compensation went to

executives, while just 17 percent went to players. Orchestra executives generally make annual salaries in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, although Rutter's current pay isn't public.

As Sanders suggests, Chicago Symphony Orchestra members have given back thousands of dollars in pay and benefits in recent years. For the last contract in 2009, CSO players accepted a 2.5 percent pay cut and agreed to perform at certain events without pay.

No further contract talks are scheduled. Several upcoming performances may be canceled if the strike continues, including a season opener at Carnegie Hall in New York City, after which Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel was to preside as honorary chairman at a \$1,500-per-plate gala dinner to raise funds for Carnegie programs.

The Chicago Symphony, one of the oldest in the US, was founded in 1891 and has a distinguished history. It is generally ranked among the finest such orchestras in the country. In the postwar years, its music directors included Rafael Kubelik, Fritz Reiner and, most famously, Georg Solti, who served in that position for 22 years, from 1969 to 1991. Daniel Barenboim held the post from 1991 to 2006, and Riccardo Muti is the current music director. Significant principal guest conductors have included Carlo Maria Giulini, Claudio Abbado and Pierre Boulez.

The cultural role of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in its home city and nationally, is undeniable. Only a handful of orchestras in the country have the endowment to support a large number of players, composers-in-residence, live performances of new music, a pre-professional civic orchestra and a large library of original recordings. The attack on the Chicago Symphony musicians, following the assault on their counterparts at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 2010-11, is an escalation of the war against cultural institutions in the US.



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