

Spokane Symphony Orchestra musicians on strike

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The musicians of the 70-piece Spokane Symphony Orchestra, who have been working without a contract since August 20, walked out on strike November 3. Spokane, Washington is a city of some 210,000 people, 230 miles east of Seattle and 90 miles south of the Canadian border.

Several dozen musicians, as well as family and audience members, picketed outside Martin Woldson Theater at The Fox, the home of the symphony since 2007, on Saturday night. According to a local newspaper, the *Spokesman-Review*, “Some drivers honked in apparent support of the messages on their signs: ‘Save our Symphony,’ ‘Music Matters,’ ‘Fair Contract Now.’”

Harpist Earecka Tregenza told the *Spokesman-Review* that symphony patrons, some of whom came to the theater for refunds, “were supportive and understanding, yet regretful ... I’m regretful, too. We want to play.”

The strike comes after months of negotiations, during which management demanded the musicians accept a 13.3 percent wage cut as well as onerous restrictions on their unpaid personal time. The musicians are obliged to take other work during that time, such as teaching, to supplement their income, and, additionally, satisfy their artistic interests.

Talks have been going on since March 2012. On October 19, the Spokane Symphony Society made what they called their final offer after several meetings with a negotiator. The offer was rescinded one week later in the wake of a threat by American Federation of Musicians (AFM) Local 105 to pursue unfair labor

practice charges before the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

Talks held November 1 and 2 resulted in an offer from the Symphony Society that retained their earlier demand for wage cuts in the current year, no commitment regarding pay in the second year of the contract, and the restrictive unpaid personal leave policy.

The web site of the Symphony Society claims that the musicians have been working at a rate of \$43.29 per performance hour. In fact, the number of hours, including preparation and rehearsal, that go into a performance are far greater than the 20 maximum contained in the previous contract, signed in 2006. Counting just performance hours in determining the musicians’ salary is disingenuous at best.

The Symphony web site also states that the musicians were not scheduled to perform for a portion of those weekly maximum hours, and that the loss of having to pay for that time ran over \$100,000. The musicians counter that scheduling is not in their hands and that the unused time could have been put toward educational or fund-raising efforts.

The Spokane Symphony, a non-profit, reportedly balanced its budget in 2011, with a surplus of \$27,754, and is not in debt. The core musicians (those required to attend every performance) took a 10 percent pay cut in 2009 after opening their contract the year before and agreeing to forego the cost-of-living increases they were due. This effectively froze their salaries at the 2008 pay scale until the subsequent 10 percent cut took effect.

Under the latest offer from the Symphony Society, wages of core players would decline from a meager \$17,460 to an even more paltry \$15,132, with the musicians' 50 percent share of the cost of health coverage, which is also increasing, coming out of that. Previous concessions made by the players, including having all personal leave go unpaid and limiting the leave to one week per year, would remain in place under the proposed contract. Even so, the negotiators for Local 105 countered with an offer of a further 6.66 percent reduction in pay.

In the arrogant language typical of orchestra managements across the country, on a collective offensive to slash musicians' pay and benefits, Spokane Symphony Board President Peter Moye said in a press release, "We are dismayed that we have been forced into the position of canceling this much anticipated lineup of concert experiences ... While we worked very hard to reach an agreement, the union chose to strike rather than continue bargaining."



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