

San Francisco Symphony musicians strike against concessions

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Last Wednesday, musicians of the San Francisco Symphony went on strike in opposition to a concessions contract demanded by management. The pay freeze and benefit reductions the musicians face are part of a nationwide assault on culture as a response to the economic crisis.

The San Francisco Symphony is a major cultural institution in the Bay Area and has received numerous awards for its recordings. Most recently, it won Best Orchestral Performance in the 2013 Grammies.

Despite the quality of their work, musicians have been performing without a contract since February, when the extension on their last four-year contract ended. Two performances have already been canceled due to the work stoppage, but weekend performances and an East Coast tour are still scheduled in hope of a quick resolution.

At issue are demands from the management to freeze wages in the first year, followed by meager 1 percent raises the final two years of the new contract, well below the rate of inflation. At the same time, the retirement age would be raised from 62 to 65.

For their part, the musicians are demanding an increase in base pay to match that of Chicago and Los Angeles. Currently, San Francisco Symphony base pay is \$141,700 while at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra it is \$144,040. While the absolute discrepancy may seem small, the cost of living in San Francisco is much higher than in Chicago. Median rent in San Francisco is 50 percent higher than in Chicago.

At stake in the contract negotiations is the maintenance of an accessible top quality orchestra. With tickets as low as \$15, the San Francisco Symphony makes world class music available to broad layers of society. With cuts to pay and benefits there is simply no way to maintain that quality.

The situation facing musicians in San Francisco is far from unique. In response to the economic crisis in 2008, the financial elite saw in the wages and benefits paid by orchestras a pot of money to dip into. Whereas orchestras and cultural achievements were once a matter of democratic pride, they are now viewed by those on top as a stumbling block to greater profits.

In late 2010, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra fired the opening shot in this assault on culture. After management demanded massive concessions, such as a two-tier wage system where wages for new-hires would be cut 42 percent, musicians walked out in what would become a bitter six-month strike.

Despite broad support among the people of Detroit, the major labor unions—the United Auto Workers and AFL-CIO—left the strike completely isolated. When a contract was finally agreed upon in April 2011, it contained major concessions. As the WSWS wrote at the time, “The settlement will be used as a club to intimidate musicians and other artists around the country.”

Since then, the list of orchestras demanding concessions from their musicians has grown exponentially. This attack has affected musicians across the spectrum, from the most prestigious ensembles, such as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which demanded higher health care contributions, to smaller cities such as Indianapolis, where musicians were locked out to force through a 32 percent wage cut.

In a city like San Francisco, where the symphony has a larger endowment, the cuts demanded by management aren't as drastic, but they still highlight where the priorities of the financial elite lie. While the executive director, Brent Assink, is demanding a pay freeze for musicians, his pay has increased from \$449,726 in 2010 to \$606,201 in 2012.

Much like corporate CEOs, there is good money for directors who reduce labor costs. For these layers there is no more money for attracting and developing top musical talent, but there is no limit to the money spent in attracting those most ruthless in cutting wages and benefits.

The demand of the San Francisco Symphony musicians that the symphony open its books is a correct one. Let the world see what is more important to the symphony directors than maintaining the benefits, retirement, and wages of musicians.

The struggle to defend San Francisco Symphony musicians, however, is not just a matter of greedy local management. The nationwide assault on orchestras is part of a broader assault on culture. The same forces pushing for pay cuts to musicians are attacking the living standards of teachers in Chicago, school bus drivers in New York, and workers around the world.

To answer the persistent refrain that there is no money is, one has only to consider that the National Endowment for the Arts amounted to only \$146 million in 2012, less than 12 hours worth of government spending on the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions.

The lesson of the Detroit Symphony strike and the subsequent assaults on musicians must be learned. It is not possible to resist concessions one orchestra at a time, by appealing to the consciences of wealthy patrons, or by confining the struggle to defend the arts to musicians and other professionals. The entire system of musical education and culture must be overhauled on the basis of human need. It must be part of a political fight against the profit system and for a socialist program.



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