

Locked out Minnesota Orchestra musicians unanimously defy management, business elite

Gary Joad
30 September 2013

Showing considerable courage and principle, musicians of the Minnesota Orchestra in Minneapolis voted down management's latest proposal, backed by the area's business elite, by a vote of 60-0 on Saturday.

The musicians of the 110-year-old orchestra have been locked out for a year, bludgeoned by representatives of the Twin Cities' business elite and media, denied vital health benefits and doubtless stressed out by the daily pressures of family needs and expenses that do not go away.

The orchestra's management, the Minnesota Orchestra Association (MOA), demanded of the players last Thursday that they accept a series of annual pay and benefits cuts totaling 25 percent over 36 months, and that they (the musicians) respond to the demand, one way or the other, by noon Monday.

The players, in a remarkable act of unanimity and courage and with a sincere sense of community and artistic responsibility, did precisely that Saturday, in resounding fashion.

The MOA locked the doors at Orchestra Hall in downtown Minneapolis October 1, 2012, the day after the musicians' agreement expired, and after offering the players a contract of draconian pay cuts of 30 percent to 50 percent and some 240 contractual "adjustments." Support in the local working class and music-loving population has certainly played a role in bolstering the musicians' morale.

The lockout of the musicians at Minnesota Orchestra is now the longest performance stoppage of any symphony in U.S. history.

Last week, the MOA circumvented the lockout mediator, former diplomat and US senator George Mitchell (Democrat of Maine), brought into the labor dispute in July 2013, sending its latest rotten contract offer directly to the musicians.

Twin Cities' billionaire and Carlson Companies heiress, Marilyn Carlson Nelson, a "Life Director" (permanent) of the MOA board, assembled a group of other wealthy individuals this month and obtained donations of a reported \$1.68 million, a piddling amount. The fund was intended to offer inducements (bribes) of a \$20,000 signing bonus to each of the 84 players, when and if the musicians agreed to surrender and sign a deal by noon the last day of September. *Forbes Magazine* this month ranked Nelson at number 118 on its annual list of America's 400 richest people, with a reported net worth of \$3.9 billion.

In reporting on the vote Saturday night, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* quoted Douglas Wright, principal trombonist and a member of the negotiating team, as saying that management's proposal was "regressive in nature, leading to a cut in salary of 25 percent," and that "it will not keep our finest players here" and "will not keep the Minnesota Orchestra a great orchestra, period."

From a business perspective, management locked out the players at a financially advantageous moment, all but precisely coinciding so far with the 15-month \$50 million renovation of Orchestra Hall. The publicly announced plan for the 2012-13 orchestra season, which was cancelled after the lockout, included the rental of concert space at the Minneapolis Civic Center downtown. The MOA saved itself both an entire year's musicians' payroll and presumably the rent at the Civic Center.

At the Minnesota Orchestra musicians' website, one of the negotiators cites a *New York Times* article about the big business technique of lockouts coming into fashion around the US, through which the bosses take the initiative against artistic, educational, public, health care and industrial workers. The musicians' website

also points out that the same Twin Cities law firm, Felhaber, Larson, Fenlon, and Vogt, provided legal counsel for lockouts at the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra 2012-13 and at American Crystal Sugar, which locked out over 400 workers for 22 months.

As the remaining musicians strive to keep their lives intact by working and playing around the country at pick-up jobs where they can, these business realities are definitely not lost on them. They have directly and painfully experienced the dictates of the ultra-wealthy. And they are being told, as are their fans throughout the Twin Cities, that what they think and do counts for nothing, as far as the aristocrats of finance are concerned. Or, in the language of the advice given to workers and peasants by the 18th century French monarchy, the musicians and the rest of the working population can eat grass.

They have also watched colleagues walk out the door to other symphonies in Oregon, Los Angeles, New York, Boston, San Francisco, Cleveland, Chicago and Zurich, Switzerland. The orchestra musical team is faced with an industry fact that one to three years are needed to fill a single opening, which is dependent on salary, benefits and management reputation.

In an attempt to grasp what had happened to them, and presumably to shine the light of day on the Minnesota Orchestra's books, the players insisted late last year that the MOA agree to a jointly sponsored and independent financial study covering the previous several years. After first agreeing to the same in January, and after weeks of discussions, the MOA withdrew from the project in April. The musicians had also sought discovery on the MOA's Strategic Plan for "future operations," and for what has been called management's New Business Model.

And since the banking and big business elite has its "own" and proprietary (and therefore secret) plans for Twin Cities culture, entirely along the lines of accumulating maximum amounts of money, the players are to learn nothing of the New Business Model. Until, that is, they are entirely out of the picture and have no part in it at all.

The musicians' team at the Minnesota Orchestra suffers its travails entirely because of labor isolation. The local AFL-CIO unions, whatever they may say in public, are gnashing their teeth at the example the musicians are setting. The abject acceptance of

management's slash and burn policies has been a guiding principle of unions in the US for the past three decades.

The one and only way forward is the mobilization of the working class and youth of the Twin Cities and the Midwest, entirely independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, to defend jobs, schools, pensions, and access to proper healthcare, and to culture.

There exists a simple truth in all this: the century-old Minnesota Orchestra would be far better operated by the musicians themselves ... and all that other structure, and frankly riff-raff, out and gone. No question about it.

Comments to the musicians can be sent to: contact@minnesotaorchestramusicians.org



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact