

Germany: Orchestra musicians protest against job and pay cuts

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Members of the Deutscher Orchester recently pointed to a development that has been taking place for several years: the gradual decline of the German cultural landscape through cutbacks.

On September 30, about a hundred orchestras participated in a day of action and strikes to protest against cuts and orchestra closures. The actions were called by the German Orchestra Association (DOV) union, 8,500 of whose members are directly affected.

The protests gained a high level of support. Orchestras that are not directly affected by the cuts, such as the Berlin Philharmonic, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, and the German Symphony Orchestra, expressed their solidarity.

The direct cause of the protests was a ruling by the Federal Labour Court (BAG) on September 25 that will mean a massive loss of pay for musicians. Up to now, a “contract covering musicians in orchestras” had linked the salaries of the artists to the pay in the public sector.

Now, the BAG has decided that the musicians have no legally binding right to have their salaries directly linked to public sector pay levels. From now on, wage increases must be agreed in direct negotiations between the DOV union and the employers, the German Stage Association (DBV).

The judgment has dramatic consequences for musicians. It has cemented the pay cuts of recent years and heralds further cuts. Since 2010, the DBV has refused to implement the existing collective agreement, in force for decades, harmonising wages with state and municipal orchestras. Thus, the wage rates of orchestra musicians are already 8 percent below those of workers in the public service. This corresponds to a loss of some €2,600 (US\$3,525) since 2010.

The recent cuts are part of a broader offensive against art and culture, which began mainly with the end of the

German Democratic Republic (GDR, former East Germany). Since 1992, 37 of 168 orchestras have been closed, mostly in eastern Germany. A total of 2,315 jobs were cut, leaving only 9,844 of some 12,159 orchestral musicians in Germany.

Further savings are to be achieved through mergers and privatisations. Since 1990, 39 former state orchestras have been transformed into limited liability companies—30 of them in eastern Germany. Many smaller orchestras are now fighting to survive, including the Mecklenburg Staatskapelle Schwerin, whose origins can be traced back to the 16th century. In Halle, the merger of the opera house orchestra with the Philharmonic State Orchestra has led to the loss of 65 musicians’ jobs.

In addition to orchestras, music schools are also massively affected by the cuts. Full-time jobs are being cut and are instead filled by teachers on a freelance basis. The already low gross annual salary of a freelance musician has fallen from €13,330 in 2008 to €12,404 in 2012.

Despite the cuts, Germany is still home to a quarter of all symphony and opera orchestras worldwide. About 900 music schools train new musicians. This unique cultural landscape is now seriously threatened. The cuts in the cultural sector are a direct result of the global economic and financial crisis, and represent an attack by the ruling class on the right to culture and education.

The austerity measures are justified on the grounds that the public coffers are empty. This argument obscures the fact that behind the cuts there is a targeted policy that elevates the financial interests of a narrow elite above the right to education and culture. In 2008, all the political parties, from the conservative Christian Democrats to the Left Party, agreed to bail out the banks with billions of euros. Now, the same parties are

proceeding to fill the resulting budget gaps by imposing cuts at municipal, state and federal levels.

The cuts to German orchestras are part of an international development. All over the world, attacks on cultural institutions and the right of the working class to access culture are taking place. Currently, this is most evident in the US. After filing for bankruptcy, the city of Detroit is threatening to sell off priceless works of art held by the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) to pay its debts. This plan is openly supported by the unions.

In Germany, too, the unions have no perspective to oppose the cuts. While the DOV has called for protests, it has been negotiating for weeks with the employers in Schwerin and has offered a 16 percent cut in musicians' wages as a counter to the 25 percent cut being demanded. Following the BAG ruling, the DOV has now returned to the negotiating table with the DVB. The first discussions were held on October 1, with the next round of negotiations to follow on October 13.



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