

# Pittsburgh Symphony musician strike longest in history

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The strike of over 100 Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PSO) musicians and staff has now entered its seventh week, and on November 15 surpassed the only other strike in the history of the PSO, the 46-day strike of 1975.

During the 1975 strike, musicians won a substantial pay raise and improved benefits. Today, PSO musicians are striking to fight off management demands for a 15 percent pay cut, job losses, and the elimination of defined-benefit pensions.

PSO musicians have given concessions in each of the past three contracts including wage cuts, and since 2011, the elimination of the defined-benefit pensions for new hires.

Musicians of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra have been on strike since September 8 and Musicians of the Pacific Symphony Orchestra located in the San Gabriel Valley, near Los Angeles, rejected management's latest offer last month and may go on strike.

In Fort Worth, management is demanding musicians take another pay cut on top of the 13.5 percent cut they took in 2010. If the new reductions go through, musicians would be paid \$20,000 a year below the national average and \$42,000 below musicians of the Dallas Symphony.

The Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra budget has been cut from \$13.1 million in 2010 to \$11.9 million in 2016 while ticket sales increased 14 percent last year.

Musicians of the Pacific Symphony Orchestra have been without a contract since August 31 and are demanding that they be paid an annual wage. Currently the musicians are paid on a piecemeal basis in what is known as a "fee for service" schedule. Musicians get a set amount for each performance and rehearsal during the season with no guarantee for the next season. For instance, under the current plan, an orchestra member could expect to earn \$34,804 during the 2016-17 season, but that could change next year depending upon the schedule. The Pacific Symphony Orchestra is the only

orchestra of its size and scope that still uses the piecemeal pay system.

Musicians in Pittsburgh, Fort Worth, and throughout the country are fighting cuts driven by reductions in cultural funding from Democrats and Republican politicians along with corporate donors.

In Pittsburgh, Mayor William Peduto and Allegheny County Chief Executive Richard Fitzgerald, both Democrats, sit on the PSO board of directors that sanctioned the attacks on the musicians and are pressuring the musicians to accept the concessions.

It is no doubt that the incoming Trump administration will deepen the cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts made under the Obama administration, if not completely eliminate it.

The WSWWS spoke with attendees and musicians at the second of two Beethoven-themed PSO strike support concerts at the Carnegie Library of Homestead, next to the site of the once colossal Homestead steelworks.

The program included Giuseppe Verdi's "Overture to Nabucco," Aaron Copeland's "Quiet City," featuring PSO principal trumpet George Vosburgh and principal English horn Harold Smoliar as soloists. The concert concluded with all four movements of Beethoven's Third "Heroic" Symphony, to which the crowd of roughly 200 responded with a standing ovation.

Ginnie Smoliar, wife of PSO oboist and English horn player Harold Smoliar, explained the importance of the PSO. "The symphony is a fabulous asset for the city. When foreign visitors come, they have heard of the Pittsburgh Symphony."

Speaking of the extremely high standards for musicianship, Ginnie noted, "When there are openings, there are hundreds of applications, and sometimes they don't take anyone."

"I used to play English horn and oboe twenty years ago, then I went back to school and became a graphic designer."

Every time I hear an oboe or English horn play, I just think about how hard it is to hold that note, or to play that softly.

“Another thing that bothers me is that some people think that when the PSO goes abroad, they just have a good time. When they go abroad, it’s high pressure. They’ve got to please the reviewers. Everything they do is scrutinized. If anyone has got anxiety talking in front of a group, multiply that one hundred times.

“It really is a job. Some people say they only work twenty hours per week because that is how often they rehearse, but it’s really much more than that. They need to practice. Oboe and English horn players need to make their own reeds. My husband spends three to four hours per day making reeds and practicing. Then they teach and do community outreach.

“Classical music in general is so often taken for granted. There is so much emphasis on STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] instead of STEAM [including “A” for “arts”] even though so many studies show how important the arts are for learning.”

Asked about Trump’s election, Ginnie responded, “It’s scary. I haven’t heard anything in the way of Trump showing appreciation for the arts. It’s all been his bombast about immigrants and so forth.”

Victor Fiorina, an unemployed chemist and ardent supporter of the symphony who has manned the picket line, explained his first experience with the symphony in the 1960s. “This Pittsburgh symphony is a world-class symphony. I’ve been coming to this symphony since 1967. I came here to get a master’s degree in chemistry at Duquesne, and I learned I could get a ticket for fifty cents. Now it’s about fifteen dollars. William Steinberg was the conductor. I would go every week. The uplift it gave me was powerful.

“I left for Milwaukee in 1972, and nothing I heard compared except the Chicago symphony. Five years with the Pittsburgh symphony, it trained my ear.”

Adam Liu, assistant principal cellist for the PSO, explained, “In our 120-year history, we have only had two strikes. The last strike was in 1975, for six weeks. Even the principal viola, Randy Kelly, and the principal cello, they started in 1976, so they didn’t experience the strike. This is the experience of a lifetime.”

Shawn Wilson, a substitute brass musician who performed with the orchestra explained, “I’m supporting the orchestra and doing what I can to help the situation they’re in. I’m with the River City Brass. We also sent some instruments here today.”

A local nonprofit worker stated her support for striking musicians. “We’ve been subscribers and donors for ten years, and they are so important to our lives. Their musicians coach our kids in their orchestra and we realize how important it is to have a destination orchestra in this vicinity.

“The arts are an ecosystem. I hate to use the phrase ‘trickle down,’ but I think the music does trickle down into the community.

“When pay and benefits get cut, it shows that the management doesn’t appreciate the musicians and doesn’t realize they are there for the musicians and not the other way around.”

Clint Wilhelm, a supporter of the PSO, explained why he brought his son and mother-in-law to the concert. “We came to support the orchestra. It was a terrific concert today. They are a city treasure and we need them back in Heinz Hall. They’re highly skilled musicians. We try to come to concerts and plays to support the arts whenever we can.”

Jeannine and Di, local mothers, spoke on the state of music education in schools. Jeannie noted, “It would be great to get music back in the schools. My son plays violin. One teacher covers four schools. He rotates on a six-day schedule. The first lesson was in November, more than a month in.”

Di continued, “Both my boys play piano. I wish the schools could provide more music.”

Steffani, a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at the University of Pittsburgh, was part of the WSWs reporting team at the concert. After talking to striking musicians Steffani said, “It’s terrible to see how professional musicians, and the arts in general, have come to see more and more neglect over the years. Arts as a whole are an integral part to human creativity and growth, especially at a young age.

“People should not have to fight for a job they already have. It’s not just that the musicians are not receiving their fair share, but also what that represents: a deterioration of a whole portion of society.”



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