

Musicians at Chicago's Lyric Opera strike for the first time in 50 years

Our reporters

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For the first time in over 50 years, orchestra musicians at the world-renowned Lyric Opera of Chicago went on strike on Tuesday. The 74 musicians on strike are members of the Chicago Federation of Musicians union (CFM), part of the AFL-CIO's American Federation of Musicians.

The musicians at the opera company, one of the largest in the US, walked out two days before the second scheduled performance of *La Boheme*, the first opera of the season, which opened on Saturday. The last time Lyric Opera musicians went on strike was in 1967.

Musicians rejected management's "last, best and final offer," which would cut the size of the orchestra by five members, from 74 to 69, shorten the season from 24 to 22 weeks, and cut other programs like the Lyric's radio programming. According to union representatives, the musicians will suffer an 8 percent pay cut—in spite of nominal wage increases—due to the reduction of paid performances.

Management at Lyric Opera said the cuts were needed to reduce costs and keep the opera alive in a time when it was struggling with demand for its performances. A non-profit organization, the Opera relies on ticket revenue and donations from corporations and wealthy individuals for income.

The opera's budget increased by \$24 million over the last six years, but the percentage going to musicians has been cut. Striking musicians say there is plenty of money to hire more musicians and other workers and guarantee good pay and benefits, but that money is not being used to compensate those responsible for bringing art and culture to the city.

The management says that it wants to reduce the size of the orchestra through attrition and "great retirement packages," which is corporate-speak for forcing older,

higher-paid workers out through early retirement. These are same conditions autoworkers, steelworkers, transport and other workers have faced for years with no resistance from the unions.

Audition notices for the 2017-2018 season advertised base pay for opera instrumental musicians at \$63,000 per year, not including paid performances. However, the drop-in number of paid performances and other programs, coupled with the rising cost of living in Chicago will put significant financial strain on performers and their families.

A WSWS reporter spoke with Kathleen Brauer, a concert violinist, who explained the financial stress musicians are under and the impact cuts to the arts have on society. In addition to paying for masters' degrees, she said, all musicians "have to buy and maintain our own instruments [which can be an expense of tens of thousands of dollars]. An extremely high level of training is required to be here. They are from the best conservatories and over a hundred people from all over the world show up to our auditions.

"We are trying to preserve the quality of this world class opera company. It's taken us 65 years to build this company and the cuts management are asking for are endangering its status as one of the best opera companies in the world. Management is demanding that we have 2 fewer weeks of work and cut 5 positions from the orchestra. This would greatly diminish the sound and damage what we are able to deliver. They've already eliminated the radio broadcasts that have allowed us to be heard around the world.

"In the last six years the budget of LO has grown by \$24 million but our share has gone from 14 to 12 percent. It seems they are spending money on other things. This institution is one of the cultural jewels in Chicago's crown and the city deserves a world class

opera.

“I think it’s tragic that arts are the first thing to go. The arts are one of the things that really uplifts and unites human beings. It’s really an important part of the human experience.”

The strike by Chicago Lyric Opera musicians highlights the crisis of art and culture in the United States and the world under the capitalist system. Funding has been drastically cut for arts programs since the 2008 financial crash, when corporations cut back large amounts of donations. In spite of all the talk of “economic recovery” by both Democratic and Republican politicians, this money has not been fully restored.

As recently as 12 years ago, the Lyric Opera held 90 performances per season, and many times was filled to 100 percent capacity. This year, it has only scheduled 56.

Ticket sales for opera and symphony concerts have fallen over the years, and part of the reason for this can be traced to cuts to school programs for the arts. Fewer and fewer children are being exposed to classical music and do not have the chance to develop an appreciation for it.

Additionally, high ticket prices put the opera and other cultural experiences out of reach for a growing majority of Americans who have less than \$1,000 in savings at any given time, much less any extra money to spend on culture and leisure.

The Chicago Federation of Musicians is putting forward minimal demands, which are to maintain the Opera’s current programs and with no cuts to wages and a nominal cost of living increase. Management and its corporate donors, however, have refused to budge.

Musicians cannot fight this battle alone. There is widespread support for the arts among workers and young people throughout the city, the US and the world, which must be mobilized. Other sections of workers, including hotel and steelworkers, are fighting similar struggles. The unions, however, fully accept the profit prerogatives of the corporations and politically subordinate working people to the Democrats, including Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the “Mayor of the One Percent,” and billionaire gubernatorial candidate JB Pritzker.

In order for cultural gems like the Chicago Lyric Opera to continue to exist and flourish, a change in

social order is needed. The rich, who see funding for the arts as an unreasonable deduction from their profits, cannot be allowed to continue to control the wealth of society. The massive fortunes of the super-rich must be expropriated and used to raise the material and cultural level of the masses.

In their fight, CLO musicians should turn to the working class to take their struggle for the protection of the arts forward. The right to living wages and free access to the arts and culture must be guaranteed for everyone.



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