

Chicago Lyric Opera musicians' strike ends with concessions deal

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A strike by orchestra musicians at the Lyric Opera of Chicago that began October 9 ended five days later, October 13, with musicians voting to ratify a new agreement presented by the Chicago Federation of Musicians that contained a number of management's concession demands.

The musicians struck over management's attempts to reduce the size of the orchestra by five positions, shorten the performance season, reduce pay by eight percent and eliminate radio programming. According to the union, at the initial stage of talks management's proposed pay cut was as high as 43 percent. The final agreement includes reductions in the workforce and a shorter season. The Lyric Opera proposed to cut the full-time orchestra from 74 to 69 musicians while the final agreement sets the number at 70. The main opera season will be cut from 24 to 22 weeks, as per the original proposal, but there are five additional weeks for performances of *The Ring Cycle* by Richard Wagner.

The musicians will receive a 5.6 percent increase in weekly salary under terms of the three-year contract, but with fewer weeks of work, the real increase is much lower. In a further concession, musicians will receive only eight weeks of family medical leave; four weeks less than the typical 12 weeks of family leave.

Kathleen Brauer, a Lyric Opera Orchestra violinist and representative, told the *Chicago Tribune* that "It's not as large of a decrease in pay as we had feared," and that "there are small, small gains in this."

The cuts being carried out by the Lyric Opera are part of a broader cultural regression, which has seen orchestras, museums and other institutions starved for funds. The reported declining public interest in opera is connected to decades of attacks on public education, which have seen art and music programs eliminated

from many schools.

As the strike began, Lyric Opera officials emailed subscribers a sanctimonious and contemptuous statement declaring, "all of us at Lyric are deeply saddened by this harmful decision, and share a goal of resuming our season as quickly as possible."

In fact, the strike by musicians was a courageous stand in defense of culture against attempts by management to degrade the quality of a world-renowned institution. It was the first strike in 50 years for the Lyric Opera orchestra and ties into a militant mood by workers in other industries opposing cuts to their living standards.

Chicago Lyric Opera musicians play a significant role in the cultural life of the city and are responsible for civic development and the introduction of high-quality classical music to millions of people in the city of Chicago and throughout the world.

For cultural gems like the Chicago Lyric Opera to continue to exist and flourish, they need skilled, talented performers and musicians and a wide audience with roots in youth. But under capitalism, nearly every cultural institution is forced to be utterly reliant on private and corporate donations. The slashing of public education, particularly musical education and other arts that do not fall under the general trend of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) learning has led to abysmal cultural education for young people, eroding both the pool of youthful talent and audiences.

If management was able to impose major cuts, it was because the musicians' struggle remained isolated, with the major union federations in the city leaving them to battle alone.

The defense of art and culture, like every social advance, is a critical question facing the working class. Public access to free, high quality art and culture is a

social right. It is incompatible with an economic system where all of society's resources are subordinated to production for private profit.



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