

Striking musician: “Art is what makes us human”

Chicago Symphony Orchestra musicians strike in its second week

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The strike by Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) musicians is now in its second week with management cancelling performances through March 25. Little progress in negotiations has been reported and musicians conjecture online that the strike may go on for weeks or months. In 1982 the Chicago musicians conducted a 21-day strike and a 15-day strike in 1991.

The board of the CSO—which is chaired by Helen Zell, the wife of real estate tycoon and billionaire Sam Zell—has demanded that musicians move from a defined benefit pensions plan to a defined contribution plan, which would tie the fate of their retirements to the stock market. Management has also proposed a wage increase of a mere five percent over a three-year contract, amounting to a pay cut when adjusted for inflation.

While the musicians are fighting against concessions by management on their pay and pensions, the Democratic Party and the trade unions feign support for the strike. Despite their empty words, there has been a bipartisan assault on arts, culture and education funding by both Democrats and Republicans for more than two decades.

In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, massive pay cuts and concessions were imposed at symphony orchestras in Phoenix, Houston, Cincinnati, Seattle, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Detroit, Baltimore, Atlanta, Virginia, North Carolina and Utah, among other cities and states. The financial elite and corporations have drastically reduced their funding for arts and cultural organizations, making access to culture increasingly expensive for broad sections of the population.

On Tuesday, the Chicago Federation of Musicians Local 10-208, which bargains for the CSO musicians, held an “Arts Community Rally.” The rally was attended by approximately 100 people and featured speeches by officials from various unions, including those covering artists, musicians and actors.

Bob Reiter, the president of the Chicago Federation of

Labor, which includes 300 unions and 500,000 members in the Chicago metropolitan area, referred to himself as the “embodiment of the Chicago labor movement.” Reiter stated, “If you want to come after them, come after all of us.” This is empty demagoguery. In fact, Reiter and the various trade unions have no interest in mobilizing the working class to defend the CSO musicians, or anyone else for that matter.

Later the same day, various Democratic Party politicians appeared at the picket for a photo-op, including Jan Schakowsky, Robin Kelly, Jesus “Chuy” Garcia and Danny Davis. They read a letter of support from Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Pelosi wrote, “It is critical that you and all American workers have a chance to build a stable future for yourselves and your children. Democrats are committed to ensuring that every worker has the freedom to fight for higher wages, better working conditions, quality health care benefits, and the dignity of a good retirement that you have earned!”

Pelosi, a multimillionaire, has helped oversee more than three decades of cuts to arts and education funding under the leadership of the Democratic Party, while trillions have been given to bail out Wall Street and to fund criminal wars of aggression across the globe.

Despite the phony claims of support from the unions and the Democratic Party, there exists widespread and genuine support among workers, students and young people in Chicago and around the world for the fight of the renowned CSO musicians.

Sam, a young worker, chose to attend the rally when he heard about the attack on the musicians’ pensions. He told WSWS reporters that his father had worked at a paper company, but after the company changed owners the pension fund dried up. “I fully support the musicians” Sam said. “The rich survive and the poor don’t.”

A pair of CSO musicians, who wished to be anonymous for fear of retaliation by management, also spoke about their reasons for going on strike. “We don’t see a lack of interest

in classical music,” said one musician. “When people come to our concerts we see a very diverse crowd. Yes, we see a lot of gray hair, but we also see a lot of young people on dates. It’s very diverse because it’s a universal language that speaks to humankind. Art is what makes us human.”

Another musician added, “The CSO is one of the top orchestras in the whole world and I think this is about maintaining standards for musicians, arts and culture in the country and globally.” A WSWs reporter pointed out that the 2019 federal funding to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is \$155M, roughly the cost of one F-35 fighter. To which one orchestra member replied, “It’s a pretty sad statement about the priorities of the country we live in.”

Top-tier orchestra musicians often spend tens of thousands of dollars on their instruments as well as on training and advanced degrees. In a time-honored ploy, CSO management—along with the right-wing *Chicago Tribune* (owned previously by billionaire Zell)—have attempted to use the fact that musicians earn more than other sections of workers to turn the public against them. Late last week, the CSO released an online statement slandering the musicians for being overcompensated compared to other large American city orchestras.

Any argument that the musicians are overpaid should be rejected with contempt. While there are differences between workers who make poverty wages in Chicago and the musicians who make more than six figures, the real issue is the war waged by the financial aristocracy on education and culture at large and against every section of the working population.

In a teleconference with reporters, Stacie Frank, the orchestra’s Chief Financial Officer and vice president of the CSO board, tacitly admitted the organization wishes to pass off the volatility of the stock market onto the shoulders of musicians by freezing their traditional pension and moving them to a direct contribution plan. This would create a second tier of musicians that only has the direct contribution plan, a tactic that has been used in other union contracts as a bargaining chip to divide workers in future negotiations.

In a video statement posted on the CSO website, Helen Zell spoke like an aristocrat surveying her property. “We [the board] all feel terrible that we can’t go to concerts, that we are deprived of this pleasure. I don’t think people realize how important it is today to have a fiscal house that is well managed. Historically people never asked those questions. Today they ask them all the time. So in order to keep our world class orchestra and our world class city we are going to have to make sure that our fiscal house is in order.”

This lecture on fiscal responsibility is from the wife of asset stripper Sam Zell. Sam earned the nickname “Grave Dancer” for his history of buying distressed or undervalued

businesses. In 2007 he purchased the Tribune Company using debt along with an employee stock ownership plan, while only contributing \$315 million of his own money. The company’s discretionary matching contributions to the 401(k) retirement plan for nonunionized *Tribune* employees were diverted into an ownership stake. Less than a year later the *Tribune*, saddled with \$13.8 billion in debt, filed for bankruptcy.

On the teleconference, Helen Zell once again reiterated that “it would be irresponsible for the board to continue to authorize a pension program that jeopardizes the orchestra’s and the musicians’ future.” There is no proof that the musicians’ pensions are in any way jeopardizing the future of the world renowned and otherwise financially stable orchestra. The real threat to the orchestra and similar cultural institutions across the globe is the dependence on the financial oligarchy for funding.

The CSO confrontation expresses a stark reality: the survival and progress of art is incompatible with the corporate stranglehold over every major aspect of life. The wealth exists in abundance to fund arts education in the US and provide artists and musicians with economic security. But that wealth is hoarded by a handful of modern-day financial aristocrats, three of whom have more wealth than the bottom half of the country.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra strike is not simply a trade union conflict, but a political and cultural struggle with enormous implications. There is wide support and sympathy for the musicians, among workers, teachers, students and youth. The only genuine answer to the attacks on the orchestra musicians lies in conscious opposition to the attacks of the corporate elite and by mobilizing the working class in the fight to defend art, culture and every social right.



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