

Chicago symphony musicians strike defies aristocratic principle

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Following the musicians' defiant rejection of management demands, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra strike is set to enter its sixth week. Orchestra management, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association (CSOA), has now canceled performances through April 23.

On April 8, CSO musicians voted to reject what management called the "last, best and final offer." The walkout is already the longest strike in CSO history.

The musicians are courageously defying attacks on their compensation, retirement benefits and living standards and have won widespread support.

They have put on a series of moving and heartfelt performances all over the Chicago metro area, playing to capacity audiences. The "From the Heart of the Orchestra" free concert series continues into the weekend and next week in public school and universities, churches and traditional live music venues.

On April 3, the musicians of the CSO performed a successful concert at Northwestern University, where attendees spoke in support of the musicians' struggle and for greater funding for the arts and culture more generally.

On April 10, musicians of the CSO performed a program of Handel, Brahms and Mozart at St. James Cathedral in downtown Chicago.

At the latter performance, bassoonist Dennis Michel introduced the program: "This is what we do. During a time like this, when there's so much negative energy in the air, it's really wonderful for us to have an opportunity to play for you. We thank you very much for being here and for your support."

After the performance Michio spoke with the WSWS.

Michio said, "My wife plays in the Chicago symphony as a violinist. We don't understand what the administration wants. It's been challenging. What will

the cuts to the arts do to the future generations of younger people?"

The striking musicians receive \$150 weekly in strike pay. They also must pay their monthly health insurance premiums which, for families, can be as much as \$3,000 and a major strain on musicians' households in the second month of the strike.

Chicago symphony musicians have received donations to their strike fund from various quarters, including the Fort Worth (Texas) Symphony Orchestra, as well as musicians from the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra.

A right-wing pressure campaign has been launched to press the musicians into accepting what is declared by the ruling elite to be an incontrovertible social fact: that no worker should receive a decent pension. This idea is advanced as though it were self-evident.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association manages the affairs of the orchestra. Its board members collectively control billions dollars in personal wealth. But the pensions and pay of the orchestra players have been deemed too costly. With seven weeks left in the season, an invitation-only "Town Hall" meeting was held for a select group of orchestra subscribers on Thursday at the Palmer House Hilton. Historically, the CSO's contract agreements have set precedents for major symphony orchestras nationwide.

Critic and founder of the *Chicago Classical Review*, Lawrence A. Johnson, also the head of the American Music Project, has aimed his critic's pen at the musicians for daring to stand by their demand for benefits and pay ("CSO musicians, management need to end strike now—for the good of Chicago and themselves," April 10).

Without naming a single one of them, Johnson claims that concert-goers have sent him unsolicited complaints

about the strike that indicate their “outrage” at the musicians. Shockingly and disgracefully, Johnson writes: “Words like ‘unrealistic,’ ‘out of step,’ ‘spoiled,’ ‘childish,’ ‘pampered,’ and ‘selfish’ are increasingly being voiced. And it’s not being directed at management.”

He closes his editorial with the following reactionary provocation: “Finally, I think that the musicians may be in danger of seriously overestimating their importance and the centrality of the CSO to the Chicago of 2019. This is not the early 1970s when [symphony music director] Georg Solti and the CSO returned from a triumphant European tour to a ticker-tape parade down State Street. The city is a much more divided and heterogeneous place.”

Johnson functions here as the servile mouthpiece for the financial oligarchy, which arrogates to itself the right to decide who gets what, when and how much of it. That the players dare reject this is perceived as intolerable insubordination.

The strike of the Chicago Symphony musicians defies the aristocratic principle—that the population has no right to anything and whatever it might receive comes through the beneficence of the ruling elite.

Johnson’s sarcastic “welcome to the world” asserts as unquestionable that there is no arts funding and no one should expect a decent pension or secure retirements. But secure retirement and health care does not worry the Zells or the Exelon executive in charge of the CSO’s finances.

Of course, neither a traditional pension nor a 401(k) style retirement fund can guarantee secure retirement under current circumstances, because both kinds of funds are increasingly subject to market volatility and the pressure created by the insatiable appetite of Wall Street. Underfunding of the pensions, which has long been used to justify cuts and “liberalization,” is also a factor in the musicians’ pension system. The main complaint of the orchestra players is that defined contribution and 401(k) style plans rely on individual employees to manage their own investments and accept all the risk.

A number of sharp and principled rebuttals have been posted to Johnson’s editorial, including from CSO musicians. Violinist Yuan Qing-Yu, for example, writes: “Mr. Johnson, when you said ‘I think that the musicians may be in danger of seriously overestimating

their importance and the centrality of the CSO to the Chicago of 2019,’ you should think long and hard about your position in the music world. Are you here to advocate for it? If you are, you should be advertising our free public concerts instead of devaluing the musicians and the importance of this cultural institution.”

What has earned the outrage of Johnson and the wealthy elements behind him is the Chicago Symphony musicians’ determination to defend and expand their benefits and conditions of life, which encourages artists and workers around the country and the world to combat the financial aristocracy’s unchallenged sway over society.



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