

Socialism and the defense of culture

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The Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) musicians, now in the seventh week of their strike, require the active support of the entire working class, in the United States and internationally. At stake is not only their own pay, health care benefits and pensions, but the fate of culture, including the CSO as a world-class orchestra.

There are basic class issues involved. As CSO clarinetist John Bruce Yeh correctly stated, “It seems to be class warfare, and we will not accept that.” The musicians are up against the orchestra’s board, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association (CSOA), which is headed up by corporate figures, including utility company executives, investment bankers and real estate investors.

The 128 years of the CSO is the record of a cultural treasure that must be preserved. The orchestra players make up an international, multiethnic body of highly trained professionals. Musicians at this level spend years preparing to audition for a chair in an orchestra such as the CSO. Those who win seats will, in most cases, devote the remainder of their artistic lives to the orchestra and its music.

The CSO’s directors and conductors have been among the best-recognized names in musical performance in the 20th century, including Georg Solti, Daniel Barenboim, Claudio Abbado and Pierre Boulez. Current CSO music director Riccardo Muti has taken an admirable stand, declaring, “I am here with my musicians,” earning him criticism from the reactionary numbskulls in the corporate media, such as the *Chicago Tribune*.

The orchestra, which came to international prominence through the efforts of Fritz Reiner in the 1950s, brings the cultural treasures of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Rimsky-Korsakov, Debussy and dozens of other composers to life in its more than one hundred annual events.

The claim that there are inadequate resources to maintain the pay and benefits needed to build and nurture a world-class orchestra should be rejected with contempt. The CSO recently celebrated a record year in ticket sales. The CSO management has more than \$300 million in endowment funds and \$60 million in its investment fund.

There is more wealth concentrated in Chicago today than ever before in this city’s history, mainly spilling out of the pockets of those who have benefited from deindustrialization and privatization of schools and other public assets.

The Chicago area is home to 17 billionaires, according to *Forbes*. These include Citadel Investments CEO Ken Griffin (net worth \$10 billion); distressed asset investor Sam Zell (\$5.5 billion), who is the husband of CSOA board chair Helen Zell; the politically connected Pritzker clan, heirs to the Hyatt hotel fortune—Thomas (\$4.2 billion), Gigi (\$3.2 billion), Penny (\$2.7 billion) and J.B., now Illinois governor (\$3.4 billion); Joseph Grendys of Koch Foods (\$2.8 billion); and Neil Bluhm, real estate and casino magnate and Democratic Party fundraiser (\$4 billion).

The wealth of the governor of Illinois could cover the *entire operating budget* of the CSO (about \$73.7 million) for 45 years. His sister Penny, who lavishly funded the election campaigns of Barack Obama, could add another 36 years. And this is assuming that the CSO received no other income, including from ticket sales. Such is the state of social inequality in Chicago, mirrored in cities throughout the US and around the world.

With local, state and federal governments slashing taxes for the rich and cutting spending, orchestras and other cultural institutions are increasingly beholden to the *aristocratic principle*. The existence of orchestras, museums and other cultural institutions increasingly depends on the benevolence of the fabulously rich.

According to the 2012 National Endowment for the Arts’ “How the Arts Are Funded in the US,” American not-for-profit performing arts organizations received only 1.2 percent of their funding from the federal government, and an additional 5.5 percent from local and state governments. More than one-fifth (20.3 percent) of total nonprofit arts funding came from individuals.

Starved of resources, orchestras in Philadelphia, Honolulu and Syracuse, New York have filed for bankruptcy in recent years. Philadelphia declared bankruptcy in an effort to escape its pension obligations to its players. The musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra conducted a fierce struggle in 2010-11, but because the strike was isolated, they were ultimately forced to accept concessions, which have damaged the orchestra.

There is widespread support for the musicians in the working class of Chicago. In each of the areas of the city where CSO musicians have performed free outreach concerts—including in the working-class south and west sides—they have played to capacity audiences. The musicians have correctly seen the success of their struggle as bound up with an appeal to the broader population.

The trade unions have, predictably, done nothing to mobilize support behind the striking musicians. The Chicago Federation of Labor has no mention of the strike on the front page of its website and has not issued a statement supporting the musicians. The AFL-CIO issued a perfunctory statement more than a month ago and has left it at that.

Democratic Party politicians have likewise said nothing. Bernie Sanders, in the midst of his second presidential election campaign, has been silent on the CSO strike. Barack Obama, whose political home is Chicago, has issued no statement. Chicago is run by Democrats, who no less than the Republicans and the Trump administration, support the intensification of the attack on the working class and the redistribution of wealth to the rich.

The working class is the social base for the defense and expansion of culture. The defense of the CSO musicians must be connected to the demand that all workers must have the right to culture. This includes an end to the attack on public education, which has involved the elimination of critical programs in arts and

music.

The basic issue is the incompatibility of capitalism—a society based on profit and the accumulation of wealth by the few and the exploitation of the vast majority—and the preservation and expansion of culture. The present cultural situation confirms Leon Trotsky’s observation in 1938, “Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society.”

The defense and expansion of access to culture requires the fight for socialism. The wealth of the corporate and financial oligarchy must be expropriated and redirected to meet social need. Billions must be allocated to fully fund all cultural institutions, including orchestras and museums, which must be made accessible to everyone. All workers must have a livable income, leisure time, and all the economic and social prerequisites to be able to access and experience the great cultural treasures of mankind.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all workers, in the United States and internationally, to support the striking CSO musicians and connect the fight of the musicians to the struggles of all workers against inequality and the capitalist system.



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