

Mayor Emanuel intervenes to shut down Chicago Symphony Orchestra strike

George Marlowe
26 April 2019

On Wednesday, Chicago's outgoing Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel offered to intervene to end the seven-week strike of Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) musicians. The mayor's intervention is aimed against the CSO musicians who have fought a courageous battle to defend their pensions, benefits and salary as well as the fate of art and culture internationally.

Approaching two months, the CSO musicians strike is the longest ever in the orchestra's history. Musicians struck for two days in 2012, 17 days in 1991 and 21 days in 1982, and they faced a four-week lockout in 1973. The CSO musicians strikes from 1982 onwards and the more recent contracts all ended in concessions, chiefly over health care and pay.

Having kept silent about the strike up to this point, Emanuel said in a statement, "For more than 125 years, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has been a crown jewel within Chicago's rich cultural landscape."

"None of us want to see that jewel tarnished," Emanuel, a former investment banker, claimed. "After speaking with both parties, it appears that we should be able to achieve an end to this seven-week strike. Therefore, I am offering the services of my office to serve as a forum where both parties can work in good faith to facilitate an equitable and fair solution and that brings an end to the current impasse."

On April 8, the musicians defiantly rejected the "last, best and final offer" of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association (CSOA) board, which is headed by figures from the financial and corporate elite. Talks have since broken down and no negotiations have been held since April 16, when management reiterated the same terms.

The board canceled all concerts through April 30, further imperiling the rest of the season. CSO music

director Riccardo Muti, who notably expressed support for the musicians in the beginning of the strike, returns in May to perform. Whether he performs with the orchestra remains in question.

Emanuel's intervention has been praised by the board, which should be taken as a warning to the musicians. Talks will resume in the mayor's office Friday morning.

The chief sticking point for the musicians remains the demand of the board to transform their defined-benefit pension plans into a defined-contribution plan, which would shift the risk of managing their retirements onto the musicians and make them dependent on the vagaries of the stock market. The musicians are also opposed to the board's offer to keep salary raises below inflation, since they took pay concessions in previous contracts.

Throughout their strike the musicians have held more than a dozen free public concerts that have been widely attended, with immense support from broad sections of the population. Attendees and supporters of the concerts largely recognize the enormous talent embodied in the musicians, who perform complex works of music and world culture that deserve a wide audience.

At stake today is nothing short of the defense of art and culture from the predatory attacks on the social rights of the working class by the financial aristocracy. Funding for the arts nationally is less than a miniscule portion of the federal budget every year, equivalent to the cost of a single fighter jet. Trillions are squandered by the political establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike, in defense of the interests of Wall Street and war.

For their part, the musicians' negotiating committee and the Chicago Federation of Musicians (CFM) have

prostrated themselves before the mayor's offer to intervene in good faith, saying in response, "We are grateful that Mayor Emanuel recognizes the CSO as one of the city's cultural jewels, and we welcome his offer to work together to resolve the seven-week-old strike."

"With Maestro Muti returning soon to Chicago and a full schedule of summer performances fast approaching, we want to avoid jeopardizing any more concerts and disappointing the CSO's patrons and fans. Hopefully, Mayor Emanuel will bring the CSO Management back to the negotiating table and help us achieve a satisfactory resolution for everyone involved—most especially the people who fill the seats at Symphony Center."

No trust should be put in Emanuel. He is intervening on behalf of management, not to defend the musicians or art and culture. Headed by investment bankers and sections of the financial aristocracy, the CSOA board itself has close ties to Emanuel. Helen Zell, chair of the board, is wife of billionaire Sam Zell. Zell has donated over \$300,000 to Emanuel's mayoral election campaigns. Robert Kohl, a member of the board, was also on the campaign team of Emanuel.

Kohl donated \$28,000 to Emanuel's second election campaign. Emanuel, long known as "Mayor One Percent," leaves office widely hated. He is an arch political representative of the corporate elite and financial aristocracy. In his long career as a leading Democratic Party politician spanning three decades, Emanuel carried out brutal attacks on the working class in Chicago and across the country.

Since leaving his position of President Obama's White House Chief of Staff to become Chicago's mayor, Emanuel and his administration have been beset by a multitude of political crises. Emanuel's tenure was characterized chiefly by his shuttering of nearly 50 public schools in the face of widespread public opposition in 2013, as well as his cover-up of the police murder of black teenager Laquan McDonald in 2015. Police violence, mass surveillance, repression and torture has also been a defining feature of his two terms.

In 2012, Emmanuel oversaw a brutal austerity attack on teachers, who went on strike for seven days to oppose attacks on public education and budget cuts. The Chicago teachers' rebellion against Emanuel and

Obama's attacks on public education was shut down and sold out by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Following the sellout, thousands of teachers lost their jobs and schools were closed.

Fabulous wealth has been accumulated at the top by the city's financial and corporate elite, while hundreds of thousands of workers and young people struggle to survive daily in low-paying jobs in a city with an extremely high cost of living. More than 17 billionaires call Chicago home, a city of extremes of wealth today. The Democratic Party and Emanuel have played a key role in the transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial and corporate parasites at the top over three decades. In doing this, the Democrats have relied on the Chicago Federation of Labor, which despite its empty statements of support for the CSO musicians, has deliberately isolated the strike.

These grotesque levels of social inequality and the vandalism of the ruling class towards every social achievement, including art and culture, are propelling workers in Chicago, throughout the US and internationally into powerful struggles. It is to the working class, including the hundreds of thousands of teachers and other public and private sector workers in the city, that the CSO musicians and their supporters must turn, not to Emanuel and the Democratic Party. This includes appealing to rank-and-file workers to take action independent of the unions, including mass demonstrations and the preparation of a general strike to defend the CSO musicians and the right to culture for all.

Musicians, workers and supporters interested in learning more about the fight to defend art and culture and the CSO musicians strike are encouraged to contact us and receive our email newsletter.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact