

# Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel intervenes to end CSO musicians strike with concessions

George Marlowe  
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With the political intervention of outgoing Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel late last week, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) board imposed a concessions contract on more than a hundred CSO musicians who have been on strike for seven weeks.

Despite waging a courageous fight to maintain their defined-benefit pension plans as well as arts and culture at large, the musicians faced immense pressure to ratify a five-year contract due to the isolation of their strike by the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL). The ending of the longest-ever CSO musicians strike resolves nothing, but only further accelerates the assault on arts and culture by the political and financial elite in the United States and internationally.

On March 11, the musicians began their strike chiefly to oppose the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association (CSOA) board's effort to transform their defined-benefit pension plan into a defined-contribution plan similar to a 401(k), which would shift enormous risks onto the musicians. The musicians also demanded pay raises above the inflation rate after being forced to accept previous contracts that led to a decline in their real wages.

The musicians at the world-class orchestra recognized that their strike had much broader implications for the defense of art and culture whose financing is subject to the whims of the corporate and financial aristocracy. Striking CSO musician John Bruce Yeh rightly noted in an interview with the WSWs, "It seems to be class warfare, and we will not accept that."

Defying the "last, best and final" offer of the board on April 8, the musicians continued their strike and gave numerous free public concerts that were attended by thousands of supporters. The board's last offer continued to demand the musicians accept drastic changes to their pensions.

Late last week, Emanuel intervened to shut down the musicians strike after having kept silent about the

walkout. Despite claiming to mediate the conflict as a neutral third party, Emanuel has close financial and political ties to the CSOA management and trustees. Members of the board include investment bankers, real estate moguls and other corporate figures.

One of the chief members on the board is chairperson Helen Zell, wife of billionaire Sam Zell, who has a long record of stripping assets of distressed companies and destroying the retirements of workers. The Zells have contributed over \$300,000 to Emanuel's political campaigns. Real estate developer Robert Kohl also worked with Emanuel's political campaign and donated over \$28,000 to get him elected.

On Friday, the musicians' negotiating committee of the Chicago Federation of Musicians (CFM) and CSOA board met in the mayor's office to negotiate a deal that would end their strike. Under the pressure of the mayor, the musicians union and the board came to a tentative agreement that was not made public. The deal was touted as a "compromise" by the mayor, the board and musicians' negotiating committee.

Within less than 24 hours, musicians voted on the five-year contract on Saturday morning. According to the terms of the agreement, the contract would transition the musicians from a frozen defined-benefit plan to a defined-contribution plan beginning in July 1, 2020. New hires will be placed in the defined-contribution plan starting July 2020, effectively creating a two-tier pension plan.

The musicians would also see a 13.25 percent increase over the span of their contract, which barely keeps up with inflation.

President of the CSOA Jeff Alexander, who makes more than half a million in salary himself, told the *Chicago Tribune*, "We introduced a way in which the current musicians can be guaranteed that, when they retire—whether five years from now or 35 years from now—they will be able to receive in their retirement the

same amount that they would have received if the defined benefit plan had remained open.”

According to this plan, current musicians would have their existing defined-benefit pension funds frozen and their future contributions would be transitioned to the defined-contribution plan, with any differences at retirement covered by the board. Newly hired musicians, however, will have no such protections.

While the deal has been presented as a “compromise,” it largely maintains the demands of the board’s “last, best and final” offer with the exception of the so-called guarantee. In the end, the board achieved its major goal by eliminating fully paid retirement plans.

After the vote, Emanuel gloated, “This is a fair deal for the symphony and its musicians, and a great deal for the future of one of our city’s greatest cultural institutions.”

Emanuel, a former investment banker and a longtime chief political operative of the Democratic Party with major ties to Wall Street and the financial aristocrats in this country, leaves office as a deeply hated figure. His tenure was characterized by an explosive growth of social inequality in the city and a reign of police violence and brutality, including the cover-up of the police murder of black teenager Laquan McDonald. He also directed attacks on teachers and public education, the closing of nearly 50 public schools, as well as an attack on municipal worker pensions.

As he has done over the last eight years, Emanuel relied on the unions to isolate and defeat the musicians strike. While mouthing empty phrases about “solidarity,” the Chicago Teachers Union, the United Auto Workers, the United Steelworkers and other CFL unions, which have a half a million members in Cook County, left the musicians to fight the powerful corporate and political forces arrayed against them on their own.

Well aware of the immense social tensions in the city, the unions and Emanuel intervened to smother the strike before it could become the catalyst for a far broader movement of the working class. Teachers are set to strike this week at charter and contract schools, including Chi-Arts (whose board members include CSO board member and investment executive James Mabie), more than 20,000 Chicago Public School teachers, as well as thousands of local Ford autoworkers, have contracts expiring over the next four-and-a-half months.

Like clockwork, the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in Chicago has also superficially hailed the ending of the strike with the imposition of a concessions contract a “victory.” The DSA stated on

Twitter, “Congratulations to CSO musicians on their 7 week long strike to protect their retirement benefits! Direct action gets the goods!”

In reality, the deal sets the stage for further attacks on orchestras, musicians and arts organizations across the country. The political establishment and the financial aristocracy in the United States and internationally are intent on gutting pensions and culture for the vast majority of society, claiming there is “no money.” In fact, the United States currently has more than \$100 trillion in net wealth, which amounts to more than \$300,000 per person. Trillions more are spent to boost Wall Street and criminal wars, while the working class struggles from paycheck to paycheck.

While the CSO musicians courageously defied the attack on their pensions with their seven-week strike, in the end the musicians were forced to accept a concessions-filled contract above all due to the isolation of their strike by the trade unions and the pseudo-left, which politically subordinate workers to the corporate-controlled Democratic Party.

Immense support continues to exist for the CSO musicians and the fight against grotesque levels of social inequality. Musician John Yeh said on Saturday, “retirements, art, and culture should not be left at the whim of financial aristocrats.” Art and culture cannot flourish, let alone survive, under such conditions.

Above all, the shutting down of the CSO strike by Emanuel points to the incompatibility of the defense of art and culture with the capitalist system, a society in which the interests of profit are placed above the social needs of the working class and the broadest layers of the population. The strike took place in the midst of an immense resurgence of the class struggle internationally, which increasingly poses the question of socialism and allocating society’s resources to meet the immense needs of society, including guaranteeing the social right to art and culture for all.



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