

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra musicians locked out

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On June 17, the Board of Directors of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra locked out BSO musicians in an escalation of its efforts to force the musicians to accept draconian cuts. BSO management is demanding a 20 percent cut in salary, reduction in vacation from nine weeks to four, and a permanent reduction in the orchestra's season from 52 weeks to 40.

This latest assault on the livelihood of the 77 full-time BSO musicians comes just weeks after management canceled all summer concerts and reduced the annual number of paid weeks from 52 to 40. As a result of that decision, announced on May 30, the musicians will not be paid from mid-June into September and will have no health insurance after June 30. BSO management continues to receive pay and benefits, despite the cancellation of the summer concert series.

According to management, they plan on ending the lockout in September in order to resume concerts for the 2019–2020 season. If the lockout continues until September and the summer session is not reinstated, the musicians will lose more than \$2.5 million in wages and benefits.

The musicians have been working without a contract since January, when a four-month contract extension expired. At the end of that contract, the musicians were making less, when adjusted for inflation, than they were 10 years ago.

Brian Precht, a percussionist with the BSO, told the *Baltimore Sun* that the lockout “is a scare tactic to elicit a very punitive contract from the musicians. They’re going to balance the budget on our backs.”

Musicians and their supporters have been picketing in front of Baltimore's Meyerhoff Symphony Hall all week. One supporter wrote on the BSO's Facebook page that “[t]he decision to lock out the musicians,

deny them their pay, and forfeit your contractual obligations and promises is utterly, unquestionably despicable.”

BSO management claims that the orchestra has lost more than \$16 million over the past decade. Rather than drawing on its \$60 million endowment or appealing to the state of Maryland for additional funding, management is taking aim at the musicians' living standards. Of note, the chair of the BSO Board of Directors is Barbara Bozzuto, married to Thomas Bozzuto, chairman and co-founder of the Bozzuto Group, a major residential real estate developer in Maryland. According to the company's website, it generates \$500 million in annual revenue. These are the social layers targeting one of Baltimore's few remaining cultural institutions.

Negotiations between the BSO and the union for the musicians, Local 40-543 of the American Federation of Musicians, resumed on Friday. At these negotiations the musicians learned that, in addition to receiving no pay and no health insurance as of June 30, their long-term disability insurance was canceled by BSO management on June 17 and that, effective September 1, the board will cancel their life insurance policies. Musicians are asking for a 2 percent cost-of-living raise and argue that management could easily afford this by drawing from the endowment.

Increased state funding would also be an avenue to provide adequate funding for the musicians, whose base salary is about \$83,000 a year. However, as with other social welfare or cultural needs, sufficient state funding for the symphony is not forthcoming. While earlier this year, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation providing a meager \$1.6 million for the BSO in the 2020 fiscal year budget, which begins July 1, and another \$1.6 million for the following year, Governor

Larry Hogan has said he is unlikely to release even these funds. That amount would cover more than half the musicians' salary and benefits for the summer months.

Hogan told the *Baltimore Sun*, "We continually pour millions and millions of dollars into the BSO, but they've got real serious issues and problems with the management, with losing the support of their donor base and the legislature took the money out of the budget and fenced it off."

Failure to provide for the cultural needs of the population stands in stark contrast to the willingness of capitalist politicians to provide handsome subsidies to big business. As one example, in April of last year, the Maryland legislature passed a tax incentive package of \$8.5 billion in an unsuccessful attempt to lure Amazon to the state to build a new headquarters. Merely 1 percent of this proposed handout could easily fund the Baltimore Symphony for many years.

In its coverage of the lockout, *Jacobin* magazine unsurprisingly portrayed this latest attack on the working class and its right to culture in racist terms. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)-affiliated publication wrote, "Jeopardizing one of Baltimore's main cultural institutions is just another feather in the cap of [Governor] Hogan's program of austerity measures that punishes Baltimore, a minority-majority city, in order to rally the support of his wealthy white suburban base."

The attack on the Baltimore Symphony musicians is an attack on the working class as a whole. This lockout, and the attempt to drastically reduce the Baltimore musicians' pay, comes amid similar efforts to attack the living standards of other symphony musicians in recent months. In Chicago, musicians waged a seven week strike in the spring. Despite the courageous battle of the Chicago musicians, they were forced to accept a concessions-filled contract due to the isolation of their strike by the trade unions.

The Chicago workers had gone on strike principally to defend their defined-benefit pension plan. As a result of a deal pushed through by their union and strongly backed by then Mayor Rahm Emanuel, beginning July 1, 2020, the musicians will transition from a defined-benefit plan to a defined-contribution plan, with all new hires after that date placed in the defined-contribution plan. At the conclusion of the strike, the DSA described

this defeat in glowing terms, stating on Twitter, "Congratulations to CSO musicians on their 7 week long strike to protect their retirement benefits! Direct action gets the goods!"

The struggle of symphony workers shows that the defense of culture and decent standards of living for cultural workers are incompatible with the capitalist system, in which the social and cultural needs of the working class are subordinated to the profit interests of the wealthy. In the end, the only answer to the attacks on the BSO musicians lies in mobilizing the broadest sections of the working class in the fight to defend art, culture and every social right, that is, in the fight for socialism.



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