

Striking Baltimore Symphony Orchestra musicians return to work, ending three-month work stoppage

Dmitri Church
30 September 2019

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra returned to work on Friday evening to play Pyotr Tchaikovsky's 4th Symphony at the Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, ending the three-and-a-half-month-long work stoppage that began in mid-June, when the musicians were locked out by the BSO management.

The musicians voted last Monday to accept a new one-year contract agreed to by the BSO management and the Musicians' Association of Metropolitan Baltimore. The new contract is a minor improvement over the one musicians rejected two weeks ago, when they declined to return to work following a management-enforced lockout lasting throughout the summer. Musicians at the 104-year-old symphony had been working without a contract since the beginning of the year.

The agreed-upon offer reduces the playing season to 38 weeks, which was the main point of opposition by the musicians who wanted to continue to play a full 52-week season. However, the musicians will not suffer a pay cut for this coming year. The contract gives them a \$20,000 stipend for the summer, up from \$10,000 in the previously rejected contract, contingent on sufficient donations being raised.

Taken together, this contract represents a defeat for the musicians. Brian Prechtel, co-chairman of the Players Committee, admitted to the *Baltimore Sun* that the stipends would be the first thing on the chopping block in future contract negotiations. Further, management achieved their main demand of eliminating the summer season.

The precarious position musicians were put in by management, locking them out for three months to enforce their demands, will have lasting impacts on the orchestra. In addition to the reduction of the playing

season, which will only hurt the relationship of the orchestra with the Baltimore community, several musicians have left the orchestra to seek more stable work, while others were forced to delay medical procedures.

The new contract resolves none of the issues that caused the crisis this summer. The orchestra is still reliant on donors, who according to Prechtel are becoming "fatigued." Furthermore, the institution still lacks a secure source of funding.

In February, the Maryland state legislature appropriated \$3 million in funding for the orchestra to address its financial issues. Governor Larry Hogan initially approved this funding, but later decided to withhold \$1.6 million that still has not been released, citing a possible budget shortfall.

Hogan's treatment of the BSO stands in stark contrast to his enticements to internet retail and cloud computing giant Amazon. The governor offered Amazon \$8.5 billion in incentives—over 2,000 times the amount he's withholding from the BSO—for Amazon to locate their new headquarters in southern Montgomery County, already one of the wealthiest areas in Maryland. This for a company that had a \$10 billion profit in 2018 and is notorious for its ill treatment and harassment of workers.

Hogan's behavior, far from being an outlier, is representative of how the ruling elites across the globe view culture. As the global crisis of capitalism deepens, funding for the arts is seen increasingly as a luxury that governments cannot afford, along with funding for the sciences, education, and healthcare. A large military budget is the only public spending deemed acceptable by ruling elites.

Artistic institutions the world over are fighting for funding and their very survival. Orchestras in Milwaukee, Chicago, Phoenix, and Detroit, to name a few, have all faced financial difficulties in the past few years, with musicians going on strike to protect their livelihoods. The National Philharmonic, which shares the Music Center at Strathmore with the BSO, nearly shut its doors earlier this summer. More broadly, San Diego lost its only classical music station, XLNC1, in March of 2018. The Harlem School of Arts was almost shut down in 2010, being saved only by a large donation at the last minute.

Abroad, arts education faces similarly dire straits. Many groups at the recent Young Euro Classic were only able to perform after fighting tooth and nail for funding. Many more groups and institutions were not so fortunate.

For its part, Maryland's Democratic Party-controlled legislature fully accepts the diktat of the financial markets over the social rights of the population. The February bill, sponsored by Democratic state delegate Maggie McIntosh, promised the orchestra \$3.2 million to obtain a credit line from the banks, on the condition that a state-appointed task force be provided to determine a "fiscally sustainable path forward" for the BSO.

According to the *Sun*: "The working group ... would look for 'structural efficiencies' related to the BSO's healthcare costs and facility usage, and make recommendations on 'cost containment and audience development' in a report to legislators due Oct. 1." The task force "would be composed of BSO administrators, directors and players, and would be led by a chair named by top legislators."

The strike of Baltimore musicians occurs amid a historic upsurge of the working class. Just as the BSO musicians are returning to work, nearly 50,000 autoworkers have gone on strike against GM. This follows the mass walkouts of educators on all continents last year.

Whether consciously understood or not, symphony musicians, voice actors and other artists find themselves along with their industrial, transportation and professional peers in a struggle against the capitalist system: the source of their exploitation.

It is a turn to this social force and the formation of rank-and-file committees, including in their ranks the

broadest participation of workers independent from the pro-capitalist trade unions, that shows the way forward to ensure that the arts are funded and cultivated.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact