

Detroit Symphony musicians to take 20 percent pay cut

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The Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) Monday became the latest arts organization in the US to announce layoffs, furloughs or pay cuts as a wave of such actions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps US cultural institutions.

All Detroit orchestra members and stagehands will take a 20 percent salary reduction during the period in which performances are cancelled due to the pandemic, according to a management press release. Health benefits will be continued. The DSO has cancelled the remainder of its 2019-2020 season, though previous concerts are being broadcast free online.

A spokesman for the DSO musicians indicated that federal government assistance would help cover at least part of the orchestra's payroll, but that other arts organizations were not so fortunate "and there remains a great deal of uncertainty going forward."

The cuts imposed on DSO musicians are part of an ongoing effort by big business to defund the arts, a process accelerated under cover of the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis has once again demonstrated that the profit system is incompatible with the defense and expansion of culture.

A wave of furloughs, layoffs and cuts by orchestras and other cultural institutions is taking place across the US. The rapid spread of the pandemic has forced the cancellation of live performances and the closure of libraries and museums, cutting off revenue to already financially hard-pressed organizations.

DSO musicians' salaries have never fully recovered from the devastating 25 percent pay cut imposed following a six-month strike in 2010-2011. In January of this year, orchestra members ratified a new three-year agreement including a 5.1 percent pay increase over three years that will likely be more than offset by health care cost-sharing. The size of the orchestra will

be increased to 88, well short of the 96 positions before the strike a decade ago.

Another Detroit-based institution, the Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT), has been forced to cancel the rest of the 2020 season and cancel contracts with artists and orchestra members.

Funding for art and artists, largely dependent on private donations, faces decimation in coming months as donors retrench and already scanty public funding is slashed. Needless to say, the multi-trillion dollar bailout for Wall Street recently enacted by Congress contains almost nothing to address the crisis facing the arts.

A veteran Detroit musician who has performed with the MOT told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "[The DSO] lost some fine players to other orchestras, including their principal cellist and principal violinist.

"This is new territory for us. MOT has cancelled its entire spring season. I heard that one of the guards passed away from COVID-19.

"It is a per-service orchestra. Under these circumstances, musicians will not get anything based on the force majeure clause; an act of God. They are out that money. Many are teachers. They are doing activities online; they are doing what they can to supplement their incomes.

"MOT lost 25 percent of all its revenue [after 2008] and that never came back. They started doing some outreach things, but those were exempted from our minimum service guarantee."

The player explained the American Federation of Musicians pension plan was already underfunded. "By 2021 they will be making cuts to the pension. With all these orchestra members out of work and with no money going to pensions, that is concerning."

The cuts to DSO and MOT are only the latest in the onslaught hitting arts institutions over the last several

weeks.

Members of the world-renowned Philadelphia Orchestra agreed to take a 20 percent pay cut effective April 1 and lasting until the middle of September, in the midst of what Matias Tarnopolsky, the orchestra CEO, called a “defining crisis.” Other staff will take cuts on a sliding scale depending on their salary level. Ticket sales account for 35 to 40 percent of the orchestra’s income and the rest of the season is in doubt. In 2016, members of the Philadelphia Orchestra struck against management’s demand for a 15 percent pay cut.

The prestigious Chicago Symphony has instituted pay cuts of 20 percent for members of the orchestra and chorus beginning April 27. Members of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago and stagehands are also taking a 20 percent cut. Health benefits will continue. Last year orchestra musicians lost their defined pension plan in a deal brokered by Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the unions that ended a seven-week strike.

The Los Angeles Philharmonic is imposing aggregate payroll reductions of 35 percent that will include the layoff of 94 part-time employees. Starting April 20, orchestra musicians will receive 65 percent of their weekly minimum scale.

The Cleveland Orchestra said it would temporarily lay off 40 people throughout the organization and reduce salaries for remaining staff. Management announced the pay reductions would likely last until September. However, the orchestra plans to recall laid-off employees in June.

The National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. initially announced it would furlough all musicians, but agreed to a 35 percent pay reduction offered by the DC Federation of Musicians.

The Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra cancelled performances through the end of May and has placed musicians and stagehands on unpaid furlough. Their union had already agreed to a pay freeze for the 2020-2021 season.

The Oregon Symphony Orchestra has laid off its entire orchestra and half its administrative staff.

The Houston Grand Opera has canceled 11 performances of three productions. The opera company reported it planned to pay artists and staff hired for the productions 50 percent of their contracts. Similar cuts seem likely for the Washington National Opera and the Kennedy Center Opera House Orchestra.

The Metropolitan Opera In New York has canceled its season and paychecks for orchestra, chorus and staff.

Museums are also taking a heavy hit. Many have already begun implementing cuts. The Henry Ford Museum in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn has furloughed 1,400 employees and imposed pay cuts on the rest.

These cuts come at a time when the Trump administration would like to completely defund the arts. The administration considers money for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to be “wasteful and unnecessary spending.” The 2021 White House budget calls for the “orderly closure” of both the NEH and NEA, while advancing a gargantuan increase in military spending, including a \$50 billion nuclear weapons upgrade.

The Detroit musician told the WSWS, “I do feel that our government has responsibilities to protect displaced workers through monetary support while this pandemic catastrophe has shut down the economy. The politicians have no problem funding corporations at this time, or in the case of 9/11 spending trillions of dollars to fight ‘terrorism.’

“I think the corporations are getting like \$4 trillion, with no oversight. It is 2008 all over again. I think most people aren’t aware of what is happening. The last bailout the corporations used for stock buybacks to pay off upper management, but workers are suffering again.”



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