

San Antonio Symphony on strike for over a month in response to attacks by management

Chase Lawrence
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The San Antonio Symphony Orchestra has now been on strike for over a month. The walkout, the first since 1985, followed a September 27 strike vote by the musicians. It comes after the board of the orchestra declared an impasse, following a failed attempt to force through a contract stipulating a \$3 million cut in the orchestra's already bare-bones \$8 million budget.

In a phrase often repeated by corporate management and accepted by their union partners in other industries, the Symphony Society of San Antonio and its Executive Director Corey Cowart declared management had made its "last, best and final offer." According to an account in the San Antonio Report (sanantonioreport.com), it called for "slashing the number of full-time musicians to nearly half and using part-time musicians to make up the difference at 30% of current wages, and without health benefits."

Musicians rejected earlier contract proposals entailing a nearly 50 percent payout, followed by a one-third cut in pay and health benefits for full-time musicians, and poverty wages for part-time musicians of \$11,250 a year, with no health benefits. By comparison, workers at McDonald's in San Antonio make an average of \$28,986 a year, according to ZipRecruiter.com.

In a prepared statement, the board stated that it was unanimous "in its belief that the Symphony live within its means." In response to this clear assault on the symphony, the musicians unanimously rejected the contract on September 16.

The board is violating the contract it agreed to in 2019, which covers the period of September 1, 2019 through August 31, 2022. That current contract stipulates a base salary of \$33,600 and 30 weeks of work for the first year, \$34,620 for the second year and \$35,774 for the third year, with 31 weeks of work (that is, from mid-2021 to mid-2022).

At the start of the strike Richard Oppenheim, president of the American Federation of Musicians Local 23, bargaining for the musicians, declared he did not believe the negotiations were at an impasse. "We don't feel that there's a genuine impasse when one side [the union] continues to want to negotiate," he claimed. Oppenheim said he expected widespread support for musicians, while adding at the same time, speaking out of both sides of his mouth, that "I can't imagine a board that loves its artists any more than this one."

According to the San Antonio Report, Symphony management "signaled a willingness to continue negotiations." Obviously, both this and the claim by management that it had already offered its "last, best and final offer" cannot simultaneously be true.

Management initially stated it was confident the season would continue as planned. The first two concerts, for October 29-30 and November 5-6, were in fact cancelled by the Symphony Society as of October 19.

Musicians had already accepted an 80 percent payout overall for the abbreviated 2021 performance season, under "midterm reopener bargaining," which is the term for a Memorandum of Agreement reached between the board and the union in August, ostensibly in response to the pandemic, with musicians anticipating a return to the previous contract terms for the 2021-2022 concert season.

This memorandum set the stage for the provocation by the board. The contract states that changes would be "due to the reasonable likelihood of continued safety, health and economic uncertainties caused directly or indirectly by the COVID-19 pandemic" and that "discussions for a new collective bargaining agreement for seasons subsequent to 2021-2022" would be

dependent on agreement by both parties. The union's agreement to these terms opened the door for management to declare an impasse, in this way unilaterally imposing its terms for the remaining year.

The union local president filed an unfair labor practices charge against the Symphony Society in response, a charge which is not expected to go forward. In what the Report called a "rare call to action," the International Conference of Symphony and Orchestra Musicians (ICSOM) put out a fundraiser for the striking musicians which has raised nearly \$150,000, according to ICSOM President Paul Austin, with donations from other orchestra members in Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Fort Worth, Honolulu, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Minnesota, Nashville, New Jersey, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Utah and Virginia.

The musicians are outraged over their treatment by management. "As the city of San Antonio has gotten bigger and bigger, the symphony has gotten smaller and smaller. And I would like to know why that is," said Mary Ellen Goree, who is the principal second violin and also on the negotiating committee for the Musicians of the San Antonio Symphony.

A big part of the answer to this lies in the decline in contributions from corporate America, especially for mid-sized orchestras like that in San Antonio.

Contributions from corporate donors in the 2017-2018 season stood at \$400,000, while the board's current projections put this number at a mere \$90,000 annually. Cowart stated that getting corporate donors is difficult and that "they require that we demonstrate that we are a sound investment." That is, corporate America is interested in investment that produces a profit, not in the cultural development of society.

Most of the funding in San Antonio comes from ticket sales, which averaged around \$2.9 million a year in 2014-2019, comprising 40 percent of the budget, according to Cowart. The City of San Antonio provides a pittance for the orchestra—\$306,724 this year through the city's Core Grants Program, and an additional \$60,337 through a city program funded by the "CARES" Act.

The orchestra was silent for nearly a year because of the pandemic, returning to in-person performances last February, with this interruption taking a heavy toll on its finances.

San Antonio's orchestra has its roots among German emigrés near the end of the 19th century, but the present San Antonio Symphony was founded in 1939 by the Italian-German conductor Max Reiter, who served as its first Music Director. According to Wikipedia, by 1943 the orchestra employed 75 musicians, with a budget topping \$100,000 (about \$1.54 million in 2021 dollars) in 1944-45, making it one of the major US orchestras at that time and the only one in Texas.

In recent years the orchestra faced increasing financial difficulties. Much of the 1987-1988 season was cancelled. The 1992 season was shortened because of a debt of \$4.7 million, and the 2003-2004 season was canceled due to bankruptcy. The pandemic has accelerated this process, with the Symphony Society projected that a mere 1.8 percent of the budget for the 2021-2022 season will be made up of corporate donations, with corporate donations falling from \$400,000 in the 2017-2018 season to a pathetic \$90,000, according to future projections. According to the *San Antonio Express-News*, the Symphony has lost money in seven of the past 10 years with annual deficits ranging from \$775,000 to about \$2 million.

Previously the orchestra employed as many as 80 full-time musicians. This was cut to 72 full-time positions before the unilateral imposition of the contract last month by the board, which slashed musicians' base pay from the agreed upon contract pay of \$35,774 to \$24,000 and reducing the orchestra from 72 full-time positions to 42, with 26 musicians to be contracted part-time. The 2021-2022 season was also reduced, from 31 weeks to 24.



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