

Orchestra musicians in Fort Wayne, Indiana on strike against poverty wages

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16 December 2022

Members of the Fort Wayne Philharmonic in Fort Wayne, Indiana, went on strike December 8. There are currently 44 full-time and 19 part-time musicians. The players belong to the Fort Wayne Musicians Association, Local 58 of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM).

The musicians are striking against low wages and demands by management for further concessions. Players' Association Chair Campbell MacDonald explained in a December 8 press release that "Fort Wayne Philharmonic management has yet to propose pay that allows us to afford basic needs, and is married to the elimination of full-time positions."

MacDonald pointed out that the Players' Association had met with management nine times in recent months and had agreed to a number of management's demands concerning "scheduling flexibility" and "changes to work rules."

However, he observed that in the wake of "agreed cuts to our season and wages that would allow the Philharmonic to resume its activities amidst the challenges of the Covid pandemic a year and a half ago, where our already modest base salary was cut to just over 22 thousand dollars," the orchestra board and management had made clear that it was seeking "to carry forth with unacceptable rates of pay for musicians, fewer concerts, and a drastically reduced presence in our community."

The pay at the orchestra is scandalous. Christopher Guerin, the former president of the Philharmonic from 1985-2005, in a statement posted by WANE.com, asserted that the "staff and board of the Fort Wayne Philharmonic do not seem to believe in, or care about the future of a professional symphony orchestra in this city."

Guerin argued that while the board had "made arguably reasonable cuts during the pandemic ... now they have no excuse. The veil has been raised on the board's true goal:

to reduce this once nationally-esteemed orchestra to a shadow of its formal self.

"The players are people with expensive degrees in musicianship, working under increasingly restrictive circumstances that make it virtually impossible to make ends meet. The 44 full-time players are earning between only \$22,000 and \$26,000 a year—less than what they were making in 2008."

The phrase "poverty wages" in relation to the Fort Wayne musicians' conditions is not hyperbole. The US government's official (and derisory) "poverty guideline" in 2021 for a family of three was \$21,960.

Christopher Guerin, in his statement, provided other damning facts and figures. He noted that "the Philharmonic is rich. Its ratio of endowment funds to operating budget is one of the most enviable in the country, with more than \$25 million sitting in the bank, against a budget of, at most, \$6 million in operating expenses. Even if the orchestra had a \$500,000 annual budget deficit (and it doesn't), it would take 50 years for the orchestra to go broke."

Moreover, Guerin debunked the claims of the Philharmonic management, in an effort to turn public opinion against the players, that the latter's demands were exorbitant. "Management has been quoted," he commented, "as saying the players are asking for a 45 percent increase in wages over a three-year period, while management is offering an 11 percent increase. How much additional income would come from either of those percentage increases against a \$22,000 per year salary?"

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he explained, reports that a person in Allen County, Indiana—where Fort Wayne is located—with no children "needs to earn \$31,600 to make a 'living wage.' A 45% pay increase on \$22,000 would amount to \$31,900. An 11% increase would amount to \$24,420, which is \$7,180 less than a 'living wage.'" The Philharmonic musicians,

Guerin points out, belong “in the category of the ‘working poor.’”

In addition to offering miserable pay, the board has cut numerous programs in recent years. “Gone,” writes Guerin, “are the Unplugged Series, Community Concerts, the Chamber Orchestra Series, many of the concerts throughout the northeastern counties, half of the in-school ensemble concerts, and the Masterworks Series has been reduced from 10 to seven performances. That’s fewer Masterworks concerts than the orchestra performed in 1985.”

The first symphony orchestra in Fort Wayne was established in 1924. Financial and other difficulties beset the initial efforts. It was only in 1944, as the result of dissatisfaction with the existing orchestra and its leadership, that a Philharmonic Society, which quickly grew to 1,000 members, was founded.

In search of a music director, the Society consulted with figures in the classical music world in New York, who recommended Hans Schwieger, a recent émigré from Germany. Schwieger had been hired at 21 years old as third assistant conductor for the state opera house in Berlin and, a few years later, become civic conductor in Mainz. Because of his Jewish-born wife (she had converted to Catholicism), Schwieger had no place in Nazi Germany and left for the US in 1938.

According to the Philharmonic’s website, the orchestra’s inaugural concert was held “at the newly refurbished Palace Theater on October 18, 1944. The mood was festive, and the orchestra was wonderfully received by the Fort Wayne community. ‘Hans Schwieger’s readings reflected mature scholarship and gave proof of painstaking care. The orchestra was on its mettle and played with spirit and infectious enthusiasm,’ wrote Walter A. Hansen, the *News-Sentinel* critic. He also commented that Mr. Schwieger conducted the entire program from memory.”

Schwieger, the account goes on, “was a musician of the highest quality. He brought out the best in his musicians.” In 1948, famed violinist Isaac Stern performed with the orchestra.

Schwieger’s successor, Igor Buketoff (music director from 1948 to 1966), brought such musicians and performers as Marian Anderson, William Warfield, Jose Iturbi, Van Cliburn, Andres Segovia, Philippe Entremont and Eileen Farrell.

During these decades, Fort Wayne was a major industrial center. The city’s population more than doubled between 1900 and 1930. One history of the area

reports that large corporations such as “the Tokheim Pump Company, International Harvester, Inca Manufacturing (Phelps Dodge), Rea Magnet Wire, the Capehart Phonograph Company, and Magnavox opened in the 1920s.”

Fort Wayne (with a current metropolitan area population of 425,000) became a center in particular for the manufacture of insulated wire. “For most of the 20th century,” another commentator notes, “Fort Wayne was the world’s leading magnet wire producer. ... The magnet wire business thrived as a supplier to the electric motors industry which in Fort Wayne was led by General Electric. ... At its peak in the late 1940s, GE employed roughly 40% of the city’s workforce.”

The Indiana city, like many other Midwest urban centers, underwent devastating economic decline in the 1970s and 1980s. General Electric laid off thousands of workers. The city lost 30,000 jobs overall at the time. In the early 1980s recession, the unemployment rate reached 12.1 percent. According to Pew Research, Fort Wayne lost another 23 percent of its manufacturing employment between 2000 and 2014.

The Fort Wayne Philharmonic strike is part of a wave of strikes and lockouts at orchestras and other cultural institutions prompted by COVID-19 and efforts by management to take advantage of the crisis to reduce wages relative to soaring inflation and worsen living conditions. Meanwhile, one can be certain that the members of the various boards of directors, drawn from affluent layers of the population, have not lost one penny during the pandemic.

The Philharmonic musicians are holding a free concert, their second so far, on December 17 at Purdue-Fort Wayne’s Auer Performance Hall featuring Nashville recording artist and Fort Wayne native, Addison Agen.



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