

Management issues ultimatum as strike by Fort Wayne Philharmonic musicians enters second month

Shannon Jones
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Musicians of the Fort Wayne (Indiana) Philharmonic have continued their strike into the New Year in the face of increasing belligerence on the part of orchestra management, which has issued what it calls a “best and final” offer.

On Tuesday, orchestra members again picketed outside the offices of the law firm Barrett McNagny, the site of the negotiations. Barrett McNagny markets advice to employers on anti labor-tactics. Many passing motorists honked their support for the pickets during the noon-hour protest.

The 44 full-time and 19 part-time members of the Fort Wayne Philharmonic launched the first strike in the history of the organization on December 8. The highly accomplished artists are calling for an increase in their wages, currently in the area of \$22,000–\$26,000 annually, and are resisting plans for the elimination of full-time positions.

In response to management’s ultimatum, American Federation of Musicians Local 58 filed unfair labor practice charges. According to a statement published by Local 58, the filing alleges that “management coerced individual employees by ‘interrogating them about their intention to engage in a strike’” The union also claims that on multiple occasions management “failed to bargain in good faith by placing conditions on its willingness to bargain with the Union.”

The union said that on January 5 orchestra management sent an e-mail to “teachers employed in the Philharmonic’s Club O teaching program held at Fort Wayne Community Schools.” The letter asked teachers about their intent to return to work in the midst of the ongoing strike. The teachers are covered under terms of the contract covering Fort Wayne

Philharmonic musicians.

“We are outraged that Philharmonic management would coerce our colleagues to cross our picket line,” Local 58 declared in its announcement. “To do so amidst their threats of concert cancellations and the imposition of an artificial negotiation deadline aligns squarely with the Philharmonic’s inability to grasp the concept of fair bargaining.”

The demands of the musicians are entirely reasonable: a 45 percent raise over the course of three years to restore pay to pre-pandemic levels and to make up for the increase in the cost of living in that period, and the defense of all full-time positions.

A letter from Christopher Guerin, the president of the Philharmonic from 1985-2005, in a statement posted by WANE.com, noted that the Fort Wayne Philharmonic is flush with cash, sitting on \$25 million in the bank and with an operating annual cash deficit of less than \$500,000.

In his letter Guerin pointed out that according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a person in Allen County, Indiana—where Fort Wayne is located—with no children “needs to earn \$31,600 to make a ‘living wage.’” The 45 percent raise asked for by the musicians would only bring salaries to \$31,900 from a \$22,000 base. The original offer by management provided for far less.

The stand taken by the musicians in defense of high-quality music has won a broad response in the community and evoked many passionate letters of support. One letter, posted by the the *Journal-Gazette* on January 1, 2023, declared, “I am sad—gutted, really—to see the damage to the Fort Wayne Philharmonic under a board set on the ‘gig-ification’

of an excellent orchestra that has been, for decades, the gem of the Fort Wayne area.

“I grew up in the musically rich environment of Fort Wayne. Between ages 11 and 24, truly every facet of my life was enriched by Philharmonic musicians.” The letter concluded, “In their drive to reduce costs and shrink positions, are any of the board members considering the youth and young people of the greater Fort Wayne area? I think not.”

Another wrote on December 13, “I’ve always been humbled to think that a city the size of Fort Wayne has such a fabulous orchestra. A friend (and earlier, my mother) and I have held Masterworks season tickets for decades, and we’ve treasured the hours spent with these world-class performers.

“Note to Philharmonic management: We’re not a bunch of bumpkins out here in the audience. We see what is happening and we want our musicians to be fairly compensated. I won’t make any further contributions to the organization until I see a sustained improvement in the way its business is conducted.”

The members of the orchestra are highly accomplished musicians. Most have dedicated their lives to their art. For example, the online profile of Fort Wayne Philharmonic concertmaster Violetta Todorova notes that she started playing the violin at age 5, and made “her public debut at 7 years old.”

The profile adds, “Her talent was noticed soon, and the young violinist was invited to the prestigious Interlochen Summer Arts Festival in Michigan, which she attended for many summers and where she won the concerto competitions in both the Intermediate and High School divisions.”

After earning her Bachelors (summa cum laude) at DePaul University School of Music, where she studied with top masters, “Todorova also served as an assistant concertmaster of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, and after an inspiring year of artistic advisory from Yo-Yo Ma, she co-founded a conductorless orchestra, called ‘42nd Parallel.’”

Other members of the orchestra are no less gifted. Principal cellist Andre Gaskins was once nominated for a Grammy award. Principal violist Derek Reeves began his studies at age 2 ½ and has “held the positions of Associate Concertmaster of the Charleston Symphony Orchestra, Concertmaster of the Columbus Indiana Philharmonic, and Associate Concertmaster of the

Evansville Philharmonic. He has also performed with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra.”

The stand taken by the Fort Wayne Philharmonic musicians deserves the support of all workers. It takes place as resistance mounts in the working class in response to rampaging inflation and the broader assault on health care, education, social services and the arts. The constituency for the defense of art and culture is not to be found in the mansions of the super-rich “patrons” of the art, but in the working population. Musicians should seek to forge links with autoworkers, teachers, nurses and other sections of workers to make the case for the defense of access to high-quality classical music as a social right freely available to all.



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