

Hip hop artist Sankofa speaks out on the Fort Wayne Philharmonic strike, its implications for art and culture: “I am not a politician. I’m an independent musician.”

Our reporter
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The *World Socialist Web Site* has been reporting on the Fort Wayne [Indiana] Philharmonic musicians’ strike since it broke out in early December. The seven-week walkout raises important questions about the role of the arts and culture in modern society.

The Philharmonic’s 44 full-time and 19 part-time musicians are fighting for decent wages and opposing the major cuts in staffing that management is proposing or has already imposed. The orchestra’s officialdom took advantage of the COVID pandemic to carry out serious attacks.

As the musicians’ website explains, Fort Wayne Philharmonic management “furloughed Musicians without pay for the entire 2020-21 winter season ... and as a blatant insult to the Musicians, the Philharmonic hired outside musicians to perform one-off concerts under the Philharmonic banner. This allowed the Philharmonic to use some of the federal COVID relief funds they amassed, while continuing to justify a smaller orchestra.”

The Philharmonic players currently receive a yearly salary of between \$22,000 and \$26,000, an amount that places them beneath the poverty line for a family of three in Allen County, Indiana, where Fort Wayne is located.

The orchestra’s moves have incensed members of the broader Fort Wayne artistic community. The WSWS was able to speak with Australian-born Stephen Eric Bryden, better known as Sankofa, a well-known hip hop artist, about the strike, as well as broader social issues.

“They’re asking [the Philharmonic’s players] to be a world-class talent that will perform for us... but we’re not going to pay [them] the money,” he said. “We want you to have another job, but even when you’re doing that other job, we want you to still be a world-class musician.”

Sankofa is a longtime resident of the northern Indiana city of some 425,000 people. In a recent interview with *Input Fort Wayne*, he told the publication, “Fort Wayne is not some stepping stone; Fort Wayne is home.” He has released dozens

of albums in collaboration with artists from around the globe. According to his interview with *Input Fort Wayne*, “Rap is something I do in my downtime, and thus, requires my carving time between being with my sons, doing the laundry, unloading/loading the dishwasher, cleaning up after dinner, doing my job [pre-K teacher], and so much more.”

The rap artist elaborated on these issues in a recent interview with the WSWS.

“I am so passionate about Fort Wayne because of the artistic community that has brought me in and supported me. We as a community are collaborative and there’s not that fear that someone else is going to take what I have,” he explained. While this healthy, down-to-earth attitude is common among the population, “I feel like so many people making decisions in positions of power have an inherent insecurity... Fort Wayne is a city that has always wanted to be ‘bigger.’”

Like many Midwestern cities, Fort Wayne was once a major industrial hub for corporations such as General Electric, General Motors and others. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, significant deindustrialization occurred as corporations left the region in search of lower wages and fewer restrictions.

“Ever since I’ve been in Fort Wayne, you’ve had these massive buildings that are not too far from downtown which have sat empty,” explained Sankofa-Bryden. In the past few years, “massive reclamation projects” have incorporated local businesses into these structures. However, “investors from out of town came in and swooped up a lot of properties” which priced many residents out of the areas near downtown.

“It started with the ballpark,” Sankofa stated, referring to Parkview Field, which opened in 2009 as the home of the minor league baseball team, the Fort Wayne TinCaps (a San Diego Padres farm club). “We’ve poured all of this money into downtown revitalization ... You’ve got your cool trendy restaurants, your spot that serves avocado toast, fancy drinks,” he said.

“It’s built up in a place where I used to live which was kind of like a slum ... After a while there was riverfront development. It’s pretty cool. There are lots of parks and trails. The downtown hotel is named after the Vera Bradley corporation, which is famous for women’s handbags. It used to be based in Fort Wayne but then outsourced to China.”

The Bradley Hotel Fort Wayne was built by “outside investors,” the rapper added. “One of the things it did which was very wise, I suppose [from a public relations standpoint], is that it hired local artists to have their art featured in the hotel, to give it a local flavor.” However, Sankofa explained, “it was very hard for many of them to eventually get paid.”

He explained how friends of his had been removed from properties they lived in after contacting the investor-landlord about a defective home appliance. “They were told that their lease was ‘month-to-month’ and that the rent had just been increased... The ballpark is great, but now displacement begins,” he said.

Bryden recalled the city’s past, noting that “someone once told me that Fort Wayne was eighth on Hitler’s [US] bombing list because it was a heavily industrialized area” at the time. According to the Fort Wayne *News-Sentinel*, in addition to the Vera Bradley corporation being headquartered there, the “Monitor Top” refrigerator, “one of the most successful consumer products made by General Electric” since the 1920s, was invented and produced in Fort Wayne.

GE chemist George Jacobs created the form of chemical enameling known as thin-wire insulation, which made possible “less-expensive and easier-to-manufacture ignition coils for the infant automobile industry. It was a significant innovation, for it helped make the Model-T Ford the first affordable family car.” In addition, acoustics engineers working for Magnavox in Fort Wayne in the 1930s were responsible for producing the first dual-speaker “stereophonic” sound system.

“One of the people on the board of the Philharmonic is Chuck Surack,” the head of Sweetwater Sound, an international music equipment supplier based in Fort Wayne. According to Sankofa, Surack has “done things for the arts” in the area, but as a member of the Philharmonic’s board, he advocates the “need to pinch pennies.”

This led to a discussion about the role of culture in capitalist society as well as the role of educators. It quickly became clear there was a connection between Bryden-Sankofa’s approach to music and his vocation as a public school teacher.

“One of the founding principles of the philosophy by which we teach is that children are capable,” he explained. However, in capitalism, “we don’t even treat adults like they are capable.” The issue of democratic rights came up, to which he replied, “The more I can positively impact children as they go through life... the better I can feel about the future. I am not a politician. I’m an independent musician.”

In November, he released *Never Easy*, an album produced by Chicago-based beatmaker Bless 1. On the song “a hundred

languages,” he speaks about the process of working with children: “So when I get the sense humanity is done for / I chill with kids and am rejuvenated once more ... Children are capable, but the process is gradual / Soon enough, lighting up eyes, the sight is magical / They hear the sounds of sounds and sounds become a written letter / The letters build in strings until a word has come together.”

On “Aprons in the Abattoir” from the same album, Sankofa touches on gentrification (“Somebody with money’s going to take their spot / Out of town investors only care for money in their pot”). However, the lyrics also indicate frustration with the population. “The system’s broken but it feeds us to the meat grinder / And has us marching to the gospel that we keep climbing,” he raps. In sound bites, we hear cattle being led to the slaughter.

Of course, the *human* population is not passive in this manner. There are political and ideological difficulties. At every point, workers reveal their willingness to struggle. They are held back by their current organizations, including the pro-capitalist trade unions. The Fort Wayne musicians’ determination itself expresses the new surge of working class militancy and anger.

Sankofa observed that his lyrics are references to the “constant need to purchase more which keeps us in this cycle of perpetual debt.” He stated that “Aprons in the Abattoir” is “basically my take on capitalism,” but that “once my creations are out in the world, it is always my thought that they then become defined by the listener.”

Describing his approach to rap music, the veteran hip hop artist explained that “my passion is not to submit myself to a machine that requires me to sacrifice parts of myself. Rap is ... where I build worlds with my friends and we have fun. I tell my collaborators: ‘Look, I want this to be fun. If this feels like pressure to you, I don’t want to do it. I want to do this because it is something I care about, not because I need to get into this rut and ‘grind’ away until it takes the joy out of it for me.’”

He continued, “I made an album in 2020 called *Glyde Drexler*, which basically explains my philosophy on rap as a passion. That’s how I relax, exploring language and the interconnectedness of language by which we express ourselves. People see my work and tell me to ‘stay grinding’ and I try not to take offense. That’s what they understand. But that fun, that childlike innocence... there’s that Picasso quote about how everyone is ‘born an artist,’ I hold that sacred.”



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