

With Minnesota Opera management demanding massive cuts, orchestra musicians authorize strike

Matt Rigel
13 February 2023

Minnesota Opera Orchestra musicians are continuing to perform after voting overwhelmingly to strike the last week of January. The strike vote followed six months of negotiations between the American Federation of Musicians Local 30-73 and Minnesota Opera management. The strike vote took place January 27, over one month after the Musicians of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra reported that management sent a letter describing plans to cut much of the orchestra's work, leading to demands by musicians to have access to basic financial records and artistic programs.

The musicians have been working without a contract for over half a year. They continue to play despite the strike vote, currently performing *Daughter of the Regiment*, which opened on February 4 at the Ordway Center for performing arts in St. Paul.

Musicians are determined to oppose planned cuts to the schedule of shows and productions for the 2022-2023 season onward that will lead to a reduction of both performances and pay by over 40 percent. Management is attempting to save money by replacing the MN Opera Orchestra musicians with pickup musicians, a commonly used cost-cutting measure in the arts. This threatens the livelihoods of musicians, whose work depends upon regular productions and their permanent employment as musicians as part of the MN Opera. Musicians argue that this also will hurt the reputation of the MN Opera, whose orchestra musicians have been a critical part of achieving the opera's renowned status.

Plans to remove permanent employment status for the musicians of the MN Opera mirror the efforts of music and theater companies across the United States

in recent years to replace their staff with lower-paid temporary workers as part of a broader attack on art and culture. Orchestras, opera companies, museums and other critical cultural institutions rely almost exclusively on the largess of wealthy donors rather than public funds. Never well funded, institutions like the MN Opera have been hammered by the COVID pandemic.

Management for the Minnesota Opera is attempting to justify their attempt to slash work opportunities and pay, claiming they are opposed to agreements that require them to "use the orchestra in the same manner as it did before the COVID pandemic." At the beginning of the emergency declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the MN Opera decided to cancel all remaining productions in the 2019-2020 schedule, resuming production in March 2021. Since then, they have had several performances, completing their 2021-2022 season.

In a letter addressing Opera patrons, president Ryan Taylor cited the pandemic as a major factor driving the attacks on opera musicians. He wrote, "as we all have experienced, that desire to return to familiar patterns conflicts with the fact that the world itself has changed, and we must change with it." However, according to musicians, he does not cite a lack of interest or financial issues as influencing the decisions to cut production schedules. Specifically, MN Opera management plans to remove two of their productions set to take place at the Ordway Center for performing arts in St. Paul and instead move them to the Luminary Arts Center, a smaller venue that focuses on art education.

According to IRS data, the MN Opera lost over \$4.4

million due to ending production. This loss resulted from a nearly two-thirds decline in revenue from the previous fiscal year. To shore up its position, the MN Opera received funds from a Shuttered Venue Operators Grant (SVOG), a federally funded program.

The Musicians of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra have been a part of the MN Opera for over 60 years. The musicians' contributions to the orchestra played a role in the celebrated status of the MN Opera. The MN Opera premiered the Pulitzer prize-winning *Silent Night* in 2012 and received widespread praise for *The Manchurian Candidate* and *The Shining*. The proposed cuts amount to a de-facto laying off 46 musicians to be replaced with temporary hires, threatening the artistic capabilities of the MN Opera performances.

These developments are occurring a decade after the 16-month lockout of the Minnesota Orchestra Musicians. The lockout began due to plans by then-CEO Michael Henson to dramatically reduce the pay of the world-renowned Minnesota Orchestra musicians by up to 50 percent, among other cuts. The attack, part of a wider attack on the arts and humanities, provoked outrage from the musicians and their supporters in the community. The lockout resulted in a 15 percent cut in musician wages, provoking widespread anger in the community against MN Orchestra management. It also led to the departure of several musicians, including music director Osmo Vanska, whose work with the Minnesota Orchestra undoubtedly contributed to the Minnesota Orchestra's Grammy award for the recording of Sibelius' First and Fourth Symphonies.

These are part of an ongoing attack on access to the arts. Recently, several classical music companies have either dramatically slashed budgets or are actively attacking the livelihood of musicians. Currently, Fort Wayne Philharmonic musicians in Indiana are in a battle against wage cuts and the elimination of full-time positions. Last year, management for the San Antonio Symphony filed for bankruptcy and moved to dissolve the company rather than address musicians' demands for no cuts to performances and wages.

The defense of the MN Opera and its highly talented musicians is of vital interest to every worker and young person. The right to culture must be defended as a social right that should be freely available to everyone.

The attack on MN Opera musicians takes place

during a growing offensive of the working class in the US and internationally. The ruling class sees access to the arts and culture for the working class as a waste of resources as it fuels a war with Russia and China and further enriches the billionaires.

Opposition to the attack on the arts is bound up inextricably with a fight against social inequality, the attacks on democratic rights, and opposition to war. This means a fundamental clash between the working class and the capitalist profit system and its political representatives.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact