Fort Wayne Philharmonic to resume concerts following bitter three-month strike

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Following the acceptance of a management contract proposal last week, musicians of the Fort Wayne Philharmonic will resume orchestral performances later this month.

According to the Fort Wayne Players Association, the new contract will run until August 2026 and will expand the number of weeks of the season from 28 to 30. It will maintain the current size of the orchestra at 44 full-time and 19 part-time positions. The current work rules will remain in effect.

The details of the economic settlement have not been released. However, the players association claimed the compensation package represents an increase over pre-pandemic levels. Taking inflation into account this will likely mean a substantial cut in real wages over the course of the contract. The musicians currently earn in the range of just $22,000–$26,000 annually, a sub-poverty pay level. Assuming that the musicians won their full economic demands, which has not been confirmed, base pay will only rise to $31,900 by the end of the contract. Currently, a person living in Allen County, Indiana, where Fort Wayne is located, with no children needs to earn $31,600 to make a "living wage."

Such is the state of the arts in 2023 America. Unlimited funds can be made available at the drop of the hat to bail out failing banks or fund the Pentagon war machine, but highly talented musicians who have literally dedicated their lives to their art are forced to live hand to mouth.

The musicians themselves showed great resilience and determination throughout the three-month ordeal, sustaining spirited and well-attended picketing to the end. The public showed its support by turning out in considerable numbers for strike support concerts organized by the Philharmonic players.

To the surprise of no one, the official labor movement offered no consequential support or assistance to the strikers. The United Auto Workers, a major presence in the city, with some 5,000 members at the massive General Motors Fort Wayne Assembly Plant, offered no support whatsoever, not even of the platonic, empty variety.

The result was predictable. Whatever extremely modest pay gains orchestra management may have conceded to musicians were partially lost during the three-month strike. Needless to say, the Philharmonic board and wealthy patrons of the arts did not miss a paycheck or a meal during the three-month walkout.

Former Fort Wayne Philharmonic President Christopher Guerin noted in an opinion piece supporting the musicians that the orchestra enjoyed a large surplus of endowment funds, $25 million, over its annual operating expenses, a maximum of $6 million annually. "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," he pointed out.

Concerts will resume March 24, with a production of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* in partnership with the Fort Wayne Ballet.

A statement posted by Fort Wayne Philharmonic management on the settlement boasted in typical PR style, "With a new agreement, we will be able to move forward together and return excellent programs and performances to the public." The press release cited Philharmonic President and CEO Brittany Hall, who asserted that the "Philharmonic has a bright future, and we are committed to rebuilding our culture to continue to serve as a source of community pride and regional strength in Northeast Indiana."

In response, one resident posted ironically, "Who can live on 30 weeks of salary per year? At least they

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aren't starving, or at least, not 'starving' starving. I'm happy for them, I guess?

"Sadly, the struggle for fair wages continues."

Classical music, along with the performing arts more broadly, have been devastated by the pandemic. During the pandemic, the Fort Wayne Philharmonic management slashed both pay and the number of performances. The same scenario played out at orchestras across the US and at cultural institutions more broadly.

Internationally the situation is no different. Last week, the British Broadcasting Corporation "proposed to shut down the BBC Singers," reported the Violin Channel, and impose an "utterly devastating" (according to the Musicians' Union) 20 percent reduction "of salaried orchestral posts across the BBC Concert Orchestra, BBC Symphony, and BBC Philharmonic—three of its England-based orchestras."

According to a piece by Sophia Alexandra Hall about the situation in Britain, "Help Musicians CEO, James Ainscough, has described the current environment for musicians as 'brutal' and believes that now is the toughest time it has been to be a musician since the Second World War."

Hall's article added, "In a recent survey, the UK charity found that 98 percent of musicians are concerned about earning enough income over the next six months, and 90 percent are worried about being able to afford food."

Sixty percent of musicians also told the charity that they were earning less than they did in 2021, "suggesting that the cost-of-living crisis may be impacting them financially more than the pandemic."

Eighty-eight percent said that the impact on their mental health was negatively impacting their career.

More broadly, the UK booking website Encore reported that "Over the last year, an astonishing 26 percent of artists have skipped meals due to rising costs."

The situation for the performing arts, if anything, is even more dire in the US, where the arts enjoy virtually no public funding and are completely at the mercy of the whims of wealthy patrons and "benefactors."

Minneapolis Opera musicians are resisting plans by management to slash the schedule of shows and productions for the 2022-2023 season onward that will lead to a 40 percent reduction in the number of performances and a corresponding loss of pay for musicians. Management is also attempting to save money by replacing the orchestra musicians with pickup musicians.

The moves amount essentially to laying off the 46 full-time members of the orchestra and replacing them with part-time performers.

Last June, the San Antonio Symphony filed for bankruptcy and ceased operations following a nine-month strike by orchestra musicians. The city is now the largest urban center in the US without a classical orchestra.

Meanwhile, the American Federation of Musicians pension fund, chronically underfunded, is hovering near bankruptcy.

Theatre Facts, the annual report on the state of the performing arts, reported that US theaters experienced a total loss of $3.2 billion due to the pandemic. Ongoing COVID concerns have led to a sharp drop in theater attendance ticket demand by 20-25 percent.

The winding up of even the limited emergency government assistance to the arts during the pandemic can only intensify the crisis of culture.

The defense of art and culture falls to the working class. The wide public support won by the Fort Wayne Philharmonic musicians in one sign of a growing fighting mood in the working class, which is determined to halt and push back the attempt of the ruling class to return to the Dark Ages.

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