San Francisco Opera musicians strike against wage cuts, the attack on art and culture

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17 September 2026

The musicians of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra have gone on strike, forcing the cancellation of the company's 104th season-opening performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* and the popular free Opera in the Park concert. In total, so far five performances have been cancelled through September 20.

The walkout, which began September 12, is the most serious disruption at the Opera in decades and expresses the deepening crisis confronting every major performing arts institution in the United States. As of this writing, the musicians remain on strike.

The musicians of American Federation of Musicians Local 6 walked out after management demanded sweeping, savage concessions. Management's initial proposal was a 26 percent reduction in wages, which would have returned compensation to 2015 levels. When that met resistance, the Opera lowered its demand to a 20 percent cut, and finally to a five-year wage freeze. The musicians calculated that, once inflation is taken into account, the freeze would amount to roughly a 20 percent reduction in real wages over the life of the contract. At issue, too, are the number of weeks and performances the orchestra is guaranteed and the entire structure of compensation.

The Opera pleads a structural deficit of approximately $15 million annually, insisting that its existing compensation system no longer corresponds to the amount of work available. This is the familiar language of every corporate restructuring: The workers must pay for a crisis they did not create.

In San Francisco, among the most expensive cities in the United States, the demand that highly skilled musicians absorb a prolonged decline in purchasing power while housing and living costs climb is an attack not merely on wages but on the very possibility of maintaining a professional life in the arts.

One of the most damning facts in the dispute concerns executive compensation. According to IRS Form 990 filings, General Director Matthew Shilvock's compensation rose 72 percent from Fiscal Year 2022 to 2025, from approximately $424,000 to $729,000. Management is demanding that world-class musicians accept deep cuts or a prolonged freeze even as those at the top enrich themselves.

The conditions the musicians confront stand in sharp contrast to the composition of the San Francisco Opera Association board, which includes prominent figures from Silicon Valley venture capital, asset management and corporate leadership. Among the wealthiest officers and board members are Chair Emeriti John A. Gunn (investment management, centimillionaire) and Franklin "Pitch" Johnson Jr. (venture capital, centimillionaire), board member Jerome "Jerry" L. Dodson (ESG asset management, billionaire) and board member Dr. William "Bill" M. Coughran Jr. (tech executive and venture capital, centimillionaire).

The strike has produced a profound expression of solidarity. Music Director Eun Sun Kim reportedly told musicians that she would consider resigning in solidarity if they struck. Performing artists and backstage crew members affiliated with the American Guild of Musical Artists joined the musicians on the picket line.

The San Francisco Opera strike follows a series of similar confrontations at the Detroit, Pittsburgh, Chicago and Baltimore symphony orchestras, among others. In every case, management, backed by boards loaded with billionaires, has demanded pay cuts, pension reductions and the dismantling of hard-won working conditions. In each case, musicians were told that art must pay for itself, that the market must decide what culture is worth.

This is the logic of a system in which the wealth of society is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, while every social need is subordinated to the accumulation of private profit. The National Endowment for the Arts receives roughly $207 million a year, about the cost of two F-35 fighter jets at roughly $92 million apiece. Trillions are poured into the military machine and into speculation, while arts, education, healthcare and every social program are sacrificed to the financial orgy.

Nor is this a matter of one party. The San Francisco Opera is located in California, a state run by the Democratic Party,

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the richest state of the richest country on earth. Yet in California, as across the country, arts, education and social services are perpetually on the chopping block. Democratic governors from Jerry Brown to Gavin Newsom have presided over repeated rounds of austerity, slashing billions from welfare, healthcare and public education while shielding the wealthy from any burden.

The Democrats' "support" for striking workers consists of photo opportunities and empty letters of solidarity from multimillionaire politicians like Nancy Pelosi, who has overseen more than three decades of cuts to arts and education.

Trump is the latest and most visible perpetrator of these policies, but the destruction of culture and social life is not his invention. It is the product of a profit system that both parties serve. The working class has no stake in either party of the financial oligarchy.

The trade unions, far from defending workers against this assault, function as instruments for imposing it. In the present dispute, AFM Local 6 has argued that the Opera is not a company in trouble. It asserts that six Opera productions have sold out over the past three years, that ticket sales and subscriptions have been rising, and that donations have increased by $8 million compared with the previous year.

This may or not be the case, but the union presents this kind of argument to avoid the central issues in the conflict. It accepts the premise that the financial condition of a company should determine whether workers have jobs and whether art can find its full expression as a social need. After all, what if ticket sales and subscriptions were *not* rising? By implication, under those implications, the union would oblige itself to accept concessions at the expense of musicians.

The Broadway strike of 2003, the Detroit Symphony strike of 2010–11 and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra strike of 2019 are only three of many examples. The same pattern marked the 2023 Hollywood strikes, when the Writers Guild and SAG-AFTRA bureaucracies negotiated settlements behind closed doors and announced them as "historic" victories before the membership had even seen them.

The musicians of San Francisco must draw the necessary conclusion. The struggle cannot be left in the hands of the union bureaucracy. It must be taken up by the rank and file themselves, through independent rank-and-file committees that can mobilize the broader working class in defense of the orchestra.

The strike is not simply an economic dispute over wages. It is a political and cultural struggle. The musicians are not fighting to preserve a privileged niche. They are fighting to defend the very possibility of serious art in a society governed by profit, drawing a line against the attempt to make workers bear the costs of a crisis produced by capitalism itself.

The wealth exists in staggering abundance to fund the arts, to provide artists with economic security and to make culture freely accessible to the entire population. But that wealth is hoarded by a handful of billionaires (some sitting on the Opera board) who speculate on the stock market and enrich themselves through the business of war while demanding austerity from the working class. The survival and progress of art is incompatible with the corporate stranglehold over every major aspect of life.

As the WSWS pointed out in regard to the crisis at the Metropolitan Opera in New York:

> What is unfolding at the Met is not merely a financial crisis; it is a cultural execution in slow motion, and a scathing indictment of a system that has long since abandoned any pretense of nurturing the higher aspirations of human civilization.

The musicians have the support of workers, students and the public at large, who understand that their fight is a fight for everyone who values culture. But that support must be organized and given political direction. The only genuine answer lies in conscious opposition to the corporate elite and in the mobilization of the working class, in the United States and internationally, to defend art, culture and every social right, and ultimately to replace the profit system with a socialist society in which culture is the possession of all.

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