Cleveland Orchestra musicians end 3-day strike as crisis deepens for US cultural institutions

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Musicians of the Cleveland Orchestra departed Tuesday for a 24-day European concert tour, covering 15 cities in nine countries, following the conclusion of a three-day strike Sunday, the longest strike at the orchestra since 1980.

The previous contract expired August 30, and negotiations had been ongoing since July. According to American Federation of Musicians Local 4, the musicians voted to accept a three-year contract providing annual 5 percent pay increases, less than the 25 percent total pay increase the union had asked for. The contract moves the musicians to a healthcare plan imposing higher deductibles, a cost savings for management that means higher out-of-pocket costs for musicians.

The new contract also codified musicians' longstanding role in audition committees that weigh in on the hiring of orchestra personnel.

The walkout by Cleveland Orchestra musicians follows a nearly weeklong strike by members of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra against savage cuts demanded by management, centered around a reduction in the number of guaranteed paid weeks of work per year and cuts to pay. The strike disrupted the season's opener, Giuseppe Verdi's Simon Boccanegra, and several other performances. Terms of the final settlement have not been released.

Major US orchestras and operas are in crisis. The Metropolitan Opera in New York has been facing a continuing, severe funding crisis. A possible deal for the Saudi monarchy to provide a $200 million lifeline to the Met over the next eight years was scuttled by the Iran war. The future of the National Symphony Orchestra is uncertain amid threats by Trump to shut down its parent organization, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C.

Major orchestras have closed since the 2008 financial crash, including those in Honolulu (2010), Syracuse (2011) and New Mexico (2011). Musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra waged a six-month strike in 2010-2011, eventually being forced to accept a crippling 25 percent pay cut that has never been recovered.

More recently, the American Youth Symphony closed in 2024, and the San Antonio Philharmonic suspended its season this February after a long train of financial struggles. The Boston Philharmonic and its affiliated youth orchestra are permanently shutting down in June 2027 at the completion of the concert season.

There was no effort by the musicians union officials to oppose this ongoing assault on the arts or to seek to mobilize workers in Cleveland and more broadly behind the musicians. This is the predictable dead end of the unions' nationalist pro-capitalist program, which finds expression in its political alliance with the Democratic Party. The Democrats, the oldest capitalist party in the US, have frozen or slashed arts funding for decades while pouring money into tax breaks for the super-rich and lavishing money on the Pentagon.

While the 5 percent pay raise won by Cleveland Orchestra musicians is larger than at other major orchestras, Cleveland musicians are still the lowest paid among the "Big Five" US orchestras, including New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Chicago. Under the deal, base pay will rise for Cleveland Orchestra musicians to $191,620, compared to around $200,000 at the other top orchestras.

Posts on social media pointed to the fact that the highly regarded Cleveland Orchestra Chorus is unpaid, despite touring internationally, and that Cleveland Orchestra CEO André Gremille earns some $1.2 million annually in base pay and other compensation, about six times the

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compensation of an orchestra member.

The struggle of classical musicians deserves the support of every worker. It involves more than just solidarity with fellow workers, as important as that is, but the defense of culture, which is a basic social right of the working class. Amid a disintegrating capitalist social order, the working class must come forward as the guardian of everything progressive in the historical development of mankind against the wrecking operation by the corporate and financial elite, the modern-day vandals.

The Cleveland Orchestra is one of the world's most highly regarded symphonies, consistently ranking in the top 10 globally by publications such as *Gramophone*. In 2020, the *New York Times* called it "America's finest" orchestra. It was founded in 1918 through the work of pianist and music promoter Adella Prentiss Hughes, the only woman in the United States to establish a major symphony orchestra during that era. The orchestra broke with precedent by hiring seven female musicians for its inaugural season at a time when many orchestras banned women performers.

In 1931, the Cleveland Orchestra began performances at Severance Hall, now the Severance Music Center, funded by wealthy industrialist John L. Severance, a founding member of the Standard Oil Trust.

The great George Szell took over as music director in 1946 with the mandate to establish the Cleveland Orchestra as one of the world's best. He demanded absolute artistic control, stating at one point that his goal was to make the 100-piece orchestra "play like a string quartet." In 1958, he forced a major structural overhaul of Severance Hall to improve the acoustics, building a massive internal stage shell made of thick wood and sand-filled walls.

Szell began annual touring cycles to Carnegie Hall and started international diplomacy tours to Europe and Asia during the Cold War era that further raised the profile of the orchestra.

The recordings of the Cleveland Orchestra under Szell are iconic and a staple of every classical music record library.

Since Szell retired in 1970, there have been only three other music directors of the Cleveland Orchestra.

As far as the ruling class is concerned, orchestras, and other cultural institutions like public education, are net deductions from profit and wealth accumulation. To the degree that orchestras, operas and museums operate in the US, they are largely dependent on rich donors, since public funding is tiny and diminishing.

The Cleveland Orchestra is something of an outlier in the US, with fundraising and ticket sales relatively stable in recent years, generating a small operating surplus. Attendance has fully recovered from pandemic lows. However, with a base ticket price of $75, concert attendance is unaffordable for many working-class families as well as students and young people.

The US is the only developed country where classical music is largely dependent on private philanthropy. According to a May 2026 report in Cadenza, an online operating platform and opportunity directory designed for musicians, schools, orchestras, and arts organizations, "After adding up the financing derived from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), state and local arts councils and charitable tax exemptions, public funding amounts to the derisory total of 13 cents on the revenue dollar." The remaining 87 percent comes from private donations, endowments and ticket sales.

The pittance of public funding is being further eviscerated by the Trump administration's dismantling of the National Endowment for the Arts and attempts to impose ideological controls over other arts funding.

To put this crisis in perspective, the operating budget for the Cleveland Orchestra in 2025 was around $65 million. The entire NEA budget was just $207 million. The Office of Budget and Management reports the US spent $916 billion on the military in 2025, or about $105 million per hour.

Musicians cannot leave the defense of cultural institutions to the good graces of an increasingly depraved corporate oligarchy, personified in figures like Elon Musk and Donald Trump.

As the recent strike shows, despite being highly skilled professionals, musicians are part of the working class and whose labor is exploited no differently than of an autoworker or a Starbucks barista.

The working class collectively must lead the struggle in defense of classical music and the arts as part of the defense of all basic social rights. This involves more than just a fight against one employer or institution but a political fight against the capitalist profit system in the US and worldwide.

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