

The Minnesota Orchestra lockout and the defense of culture in the US

By Eric London
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This statement is being distributed at concerts organized by the musicians of the Minnesota Orchestra on Friday and Saturday. The lockout of the musicians in the Minnesota Orchestra is a major political and social event, the implications of which will be felt far beyond the borders of the state. The region's leading center of cultural life is threatened by the insatiable demands of a layer of aristocrats who have forced the musicians to go without pay and benefits for over a year.

At issue is much more than the wages of musicians, which management at the Minnesota Orchestral Association (MOA) have proposed to cut between 25 and 50 percent. The attack on the musicians by the MOA amounts to nothing less than a looting of the cultural rights of the people of Minnesota.

The lockout has already had a devastating impact on the status of the orchestra as a world-class musical institution. Dozens of musicians have been forced to resign, including famed music director Osmo Vänskä, who issued his resignation on Tuesday after management rejected two contract offers and reiterated its demand that the musicians accept a pay cut of at least 25 percent.

As a result of these losses, the very existence of the 110-year-old orchestra, an ensemble that played through two world wars and nineteen presidents, has been called into question.

The effort to make medieval minstrels out of the Minnesota Orchestra musicians is part of a nationwide attack waged by the ruling class against the basic social right to culture. In the past half-decade, dozens of orchestras have been subject to similar attacks. Pay cuts have been imposed on musicians at symphony orchestras in Philadelphia, Phoenix, Houston, Cincinnati, Seattle, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Nashville, Baltimore, Atlanta, Virginia, San Francisco, North Carolina, Utah, and many other locations.

Funding for education, music and the arts has been

slashed by both Democrats and Republicans. As a result, museums nationwide have been forced to lay off staff and close galleries. Libraries, too, are reducing staffing and hours. Public schools are slashing the availability of art and music programs. Annual funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) equals the amount spent to pay for one day of fighting during the war in Iraq.

These attacks come as the ruling class sets its sights on destroying those cultural institutions that have served as pillars of popular access to art and culture.

The New York City Opera, long known as the "people's opera," was forced to announce its filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection earlier this week. The 70-year-old company cancelled its 2013-14 season and announced that it would begin to wind down operations immediately.

The hostility of the ruling class to popular access to art and culture is evinced most clearly by Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr's threats to sell off art in the Detroit Institute of Arts in order to pay off the city's Wall Street creditors.

Despite claims by the museum's director that the sell-off of the art will force the DIA to close, Detroit's bondholders and the corporate elite are salivating over the prospect of selling the art to private donors. The well-connected editor of the *Detroit News* wrote last weekend after having spoken to "three people at the top of the decision-making in the bankruptcy process" that "all said, without question, at least part of the [DIA's] collection will have to be--their word--'monetized' before the bankruptcy is resolved."

There is more than a whiff of the "aristocratic principle" in the ruling class' assault on the right to culture. The vision shared by the representatives of the financial elite is one in which musicians are paid as court servants to perform at the dinner parties of the well-to-do, while priceless Van Goghs and Bruegels hang above the

fireplace on the living room wall.

The nationwide assault on the right to culture is being waged by both major big business parties. The situation is no different in Minnesota (where the Democrats are known as the DFL).

DFL Governor Mark Dayton and DFL Minneapolis Mayor RT Rybak have called the interests of the MOA “very legitimate” while saying they “are not going to take sides” in the lockout. Such statements serve only to support the orchestra bosses, who issued a statement thanking Rybak and Dayton for their “neutrality” in mid-September.

Several prominent Democrats sit on the Executive Committee of the MOA’s board. Most notable among them is Jon Campbell, Chairman of the Board of Directors, who has given thousands of dollars exclusively to Democratic candidates and politicians in the previous year alone.

As always, the local political establishment has attempted to peddle the lie that there is “no money” to pay musicians.

The editorial board of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, a paper with strong connections to the Democratic Party and whose CEO sits on the MOA Board of Directors, wrote less than a month ago that “[t]he Minnesota Orchestra in its current form, and perhaps at its current level of excellence, cannot be sustained. As much as both sides would like to think the orchestra is all about the art, it’s really, at this dreadful moment, all about the money. There is simply not enough of it.”

Such a preposterous lie is not hard to refute: the net worth of a single MOA board member, Marilyn Carlson Nelson (whose \$3.9 billion makes her the 118th richest American), could pay the entire operating budget of the orchestra for 130 years!

The coterie of millionaires and billionaires that sit on the MOA board and double as CEOs and executive vice presidents of the nation’s largest banks and corporations have no right to claim there is no money.

This layer has profited greatly from the economic “recovery,” which has witnessed a massive transfer of wealth from the working population to the ruling class. From 2009 to 2012, the top 1 percent of society captured a remarkable 95 percent of all income growth. Meanwhile, household income has fallen to the lowest level in nearly 25 years, while poverty remains at the highest level in decades.

The same social layer that is attacking the musicians is carrying out an offensive against the living conditions of

the working class. The claim that there is “no money” has been used by the Obama administration to slash funding for food stamps, unemployment benefits, Head Start pre-school programs, and other social services upon which tens of millions rely. At the same time, the Federal Reserve disburses \$85 billion each month in free money to Wall Street to buy the banks’ junk bonds and keep interest rates low.

The offensive against living conditions is inextricably linked to the attack on cultural rights. The same financial aristocrats who are overseeing the impoverishment of massive layers of American society have no interest in providing the working class with access to culture or intellectual stimulation. Instead, they see money to be made by starving cultural institutions and hoarding the remains.

There is only one social force--the working class--that can and must come to the defense of culture and all that is progressive in human society. There is deep sentiment among workers for rejecting the entire framework of the Minnesota Orchestra lockout and the attack on social rights. This opposition must be given political expression.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on musicians and supporters to appeal to the working class of the Twin Cities and internationally to tie the defense of culture to the defense of living conditions and democratic rights. Such an appeal must call for the formation of a workers, youth, and musicians’ committee for the defense of culture, whose task it will be to mobilize the population of the Twin Cities to break with the DFL and GOP and wage a broad campaign in defense of social rights.

The defense of culture is only possible through a political struggle against capitalism. The resources to ensure these rights must be made available through the expropriation of the banks and major corporations. The money kept in the bank accounts of the rich must be made available to be spent on revitalizing cultural infrastructure and economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit.

For more information, call the Socialist Equality Party in Minneapolis at 612-293-5677.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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