

Pittsburgh Symphony musicians begin their second month on strike

By Samuel Davidson
3 November 2016

Striking Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PSO) musicians are entering their second month on strike against management demands for 15 percent pay cuts, job cuts and cuts to pensions.

In Pittsburgh talks were held with a mediator over the weekend, but both PSO management and the union, Musicians of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, have agreed to a news blackout. Last week, Pittsburgh Mayor and PSO board member William Peduto met with union leaders and management, but insisted that details of the discussion not be disclosed.

Peduto, a member of the PSO board, has refused to release emails exchanged with other board members about the contract negotiations as part of a Right-To-Know request from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Peduto's refusal to release the emails is in violation of Pennsylvania law that requires all government records be open to public, with only a few exceptions.

The walkout by Pittsburgh musicians is a reflection of a continuing assault on funding for the arts nationwide. It follows a strike by musicians of the Philadelphia Orchestra last month. Meanwhile, in Texas, musicians of the Fort Worth Symphony have been on strike since the beginning of September against demands for pay cuts. Management has cancelled concerts through the end of the year, an indication that it has no plans to settle the strike soon.

Pittsburgh Symphony musicians have been negotiating with management since last February. Management has claimed that it is facing a \$20 million deficit over the next five years, but players insist that they are using worst-case figures to come up with those numbers. Over the summer, management presented the musicians with demands for a 25 percent pay cut. Pittsburgh Symphony musicians have granted

concessions in the past three contracts.

While management is touting the "excessive" salaries of the musicians, most musicians have a mountain of student loan debt and are paying on loans for their instruments, which can cost more than a home.

Management also wants to end to defined-benefit pensions for all active employees, and plans to reduce the size of the orchestra. Pensions were already taken away from younger and newer musicians and replaced with 401(k) personal accounts as part of a 2011 contract deal.

The PSO is a world-class orchestra and is considered one of the top ten in the United States. Each year the PSO conducts a European tour, performing in major cities throughout the continent.

The PSO has not released an audit of its finances, nor does it publish them on its website. Its income is based on the sale of tickets, fundraising, as well as foundation and institutional support.

A look at the website of several large foundations and institutions does show that they have been cutting back support for the PSO. For instance, the Heinz Endowments gave \$214,000 in each of 2012, 13 and 14 towards the PSO's operating budget as well as other grants for special concerts and capital improvements. In 2011, the endowment gave \$10 million to the symphony for its Commitment to Excellence campaign. But in 2015, the endowment did not give anything.

The Allegheny County Regional Assist District, which receives its money from one-half of the one percent sales tax in the county, which is meant to support arts and culture, sports and libraries, provided only \$1.1 million to the PSO in its latest budget. This is only slightly higher than the \$1 million budgeted for the symphony in 2005. When inflation is considered it amounts to a cut of \$136,000.

State funding for the symphony has also been cut by \$1,000,000 since 2009.

There is a very close tie between wealthy donors, the foundations and the PSO. Many of the board members are themselves donors or sit on the boards of the various charitable foundations.

Another major donor to the PSO is Richard Simmons, who was the board's chairman until late last year and is still a member of the board. Simmons made his money as CEO of Allegheny Technologies, which he headed until recently, and of which he remains a major stockholder. Last year, ATI locked out 2,200 of its workers demanding cuts in pay, health care and pensions along with changes in scheduling and work rules.

Prior to his retirement as board chairman, Simmons made a large donation to the PSO; however, last year he held up half of it and will only begin releasing the money in 2018. It is very likely that he is demanding attacks against the musicians as a condition of the donation.

An inside source told the *World Socialist Web Site* that many foundations have threatened to withhold support for the PSO until it produces what they consider a credible five-year financial plan and these stipulations are likely a motivating factor behind management's demands for cuts.

The reduction in support to the PSO mirrors the cuts to art and music at all levels of government and throughout society as a whole. Massive funding cuts to education over the past five years have had a devastating impact on art and music programs, which are often the first to be eliminated. Students in most schools are likely to only get one art or music class per week, if any.

On a federal level, the National Endowments for the Arts has seen its budget cut by \$21.5 million or 14 percent since 2010 under the Obama administration. In 1996, the Bill Clinton administration cut the NEA's budget by over 50 percent.

The NEA's entire annual budget of only \$150 million is less than what the Pentagon spends in less than three hours. It is just a small fraction of the cost of an aircraft carrier, submarine or fighter jet.

The fact that music, art and museums are so reliant on the contributions of wealthy donors and foundations means they face a permanent crisis. Access to these

institutions is a social right and must be fully funded by the government to ensure a decent living standard for musicians and other artists along with free access for the public as a whole.

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