

Pittsburgh symphony musicians continue strike against wage cuts and job losses

By Samuel Davidson
11 November 2016

A news blackout continues over negotiations between the musicians of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PSO) and the Orchestra's board and CEO.

Musicians have been on strike for over a month against draconian demands to accept a 15 percent pay cut, eliminate defined pension benefits and reduce the size of the orchestra by 10 percent or more.

Management is demanding the cuts to offset a projected \$20 million deficit over the next five years. Musicians, who have granted concessions in each of the past three contracts, point out that management has used the most pessimistic economic assumptions and has not made public its finances for the current year.

Musicians also explain that the cuts would have the effect of reducing the quality of music, as the orchestra is turned from its world class status into only a stepping stone for players moving to the top-tier orchestras.

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

Foundations such as the Heinz Foundation, along with other large donors, are demanding that the orchestra make the cuts, regardless of the effect on the quality of the music. Concerts have been cancelled through November 18.

The organization also wants to end 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.

Musicians of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra also remain on strike against massive cuts and concession demands. They have been on strike since the beginning of September and management has

cancelled concerts through the end of the year.

Last Sunday, the musicians of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra performed the first of two free *Bravo for Beethoven* concerts.

Taylor and Tatiana are two students from West Virginia University in Morgantown who traveled to Pittsburgh to hear the musicians play.

"We are music majors, we play the flute, and to see music live, always seeing an orchestra is always a pleasure, just experiencing it," said Tatiana.

"Music allows people to express themselves in different ways. I know that is said a lot, but no matter how many times it is said, it is true.

"Music brings people together, there is so much emotion in it," she added. "There is also a lot of history within it and that is really important as well."

Taylor said, "Music education should definitely be expanded because otherwise it really limits creativity. If you are just learning math, sciences, history, that is all factual information, whereas arts and music allow people to be expressive and have their own ideas."

Bonnie Shaner said, "I am a therapist. I'm a pianist and I attend the Pittsburgh Symphony regularly. It is important to me both personally and professionally, and as an asset and one of the treasures of the city."

"I support the musicians and symphony," said Tanaz Walendziewicz. "I've grown up with music all my life. I've met my best friends with music. I work at the ballet. Music is a big part of what I do in my everyday life."

Asked if he felt that the country was going backward with the cuts in art and music education, Tanaz responded, "Absolutely. It is one of the most important things—education in the arts. If it wasn't for that, your creative mind is something different. I mean it makes you think about something different when you have

music in your life.”

The musicians’ performance took place at the Carnegie Library Music Hall of Homestead. The grand library and music hall was built by Andrew Carnegie in 1896 following the brutal defeat of the 1892 Homestead Steel Strike at Carnegie’s steel mill.

In one of the largest strikes of its time, steelworkers were resisting a 22 percent pay cut and fighting for shorter hours. The strike was one of the first attempts to unite skilled and unskilled workers. Union meetings and flyers were published in many different languages so that immigrant workers from different countries could understand the union’s demands.

Several workers were killed on July 6, 1892, when Henry Clay Frick, whom Carnegie had appointed to head the mill, attempted to bring in 300 Pinkerton guards to take control of the mill away from the workers.

The Pinkertons were defeated, but the battle provided the justification for the mobilization by the governor to send in 8,000 members of the state militia to break the strike.

Tom Schaefer, from Shaler Township, is a big supporter of the musicians.

“The reason for the support the musicians is a basic axiom. They are really at this point performing as one of the top, I would say, 15 orchestras in the world. For the management and the board to attempt to systematically destroy this musical body is a problem not just for the audiences of the city of Pittsburgh but it is an action that deserves wider attention.

“Essentially what has happened here is that while the musicians have continued to thrive and become better, the board and the upper management have failed miserably in their job to support the musicians. The musicians aren’t there for the board, the board is there for the orchestra.”

Speaking on the role of the orchestra in society, Tom said, “this is the type of music that transcends time, it speaks to the finest of the human condition. I do believe that people can be enlightened by it, touched by it, no matter if they know a lot about it or not. It is the type of basic, almost visceral, experience that almost any human can relate to.

“Classical music or the symphonic repertoire really can speak to the best of the human condition. To try and take an action that compromises the quality of this

particular orchestra is nearly a crime against the arts and therefore of humanity.

“I speak very strongly on this because in my youth I aspired to be one of these people and was fairly well along the way. And it is very important that orchestras like this survive, not only in America but worldwide. At a time when many other nations have taken on the responsibility to support their orchestras we have fallen very far behind.

“I believe our focus for spending has been skewed for so long that there are now generations of people who don’t necessarily understand where the priorities are. I have tried to live my life understanding that it is how we treat the least of society, as opposed to how the best of society are living, that speaks to our quality of life.”

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>