

“Music is the language of the world”

Striking Chicago Symphony Orchestra musicians hold successful free concerts

By George Marlowe and Michael Walters
29 March 2019

The strike by Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) musicians is now in its third week with management canceling performances through April 2. On Sunday, the musician union’s negotiating team and management agreed to suspend negotiations after talks broke down.

The CSO Board—headed by Helen Zell, wife of billionaire real estate mogul Sam Zell, and president, Jeff Alexander (who makes more than half a million dollars in annual salary)—continues to demand that musicians accept drastic changes to their pension plan. Zell’s wife previously said, “it would be irresponsible for the Board to continue to authorize a pension program that jeopardizes the Orchestra’s future.” Under the proposal by management, the musicians would see their pensions transformed from a defined-benefit plan to a defined-contribution plan. Such a change would lead to an increase in pension contributions from musicians and tie the fate of their retirement benefits to the gyrations of the stock market.

In addition to ending payments to the current pension plan, management also wants all new musicians enrolled into a defined-contribution plan from the outset, effectively creating a second-tier retirement plan. Also, at issue are salary increases. The Board has called for a five percent increase over three years, an effective wage cut when adjusted for inflation. The Chicago Federation of Musicians has called for a 12.5 percent increase.

What is at stake is nothing less than the defense of art, music and culture against the obliteration of arts funding by billionaires and the government. Orchestras, museums, and arts organizations across the country and the world have endured budget cuts, closures and layoffs since the financial crisis of 2008. The fate of art and culture in the United States increasingly depends on diminishing corporate largesse, funds from wealthy financial aristocrats and miniscule government funding from the National Endowment of Arts (NEA). Under such demeaning conditions, arts and culture cannot survive, let alone thrive.

The courageous stand taken by CSO musicians has generated an outpouring of support from workers across the world, including teachers, actors and other musicians. The strikers have received support from cast and crew members from the plays *Hamilton*, *A Bronx Tale*, the television show *Chicago Fire* and the improvisational comedy institution *The Second City*. Chicago bus drivers frequently honk at the picketing musicians as they drive by along Michigan Avenue in front of the CSO.

Most recently, world-renowned conductor Daniel Barenboim, who has been subject to a vicious right-wing attack in Germany, lent his support to the strike. Barenboim, who was conductor of the CSO from 1991 to 2006, said, “The Chicago Symphony Orchestra is a cultural jewel of the world. I would like to encourage the Board, the Musicians, the public and the City of Chicago to resist any attempt that will reduce that status. I offer my full support to the Musicians of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.”

On Tuesday, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra was scheduled to perform at the Chicago Symphony Center. As a result of the CSO strike, the performance was canceled. Several of the San Francisco musicians joined the picket line and members of the brass section played a collaborative performance.

On Thursday, Charlie Powers, cellist in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, showed up to support the musicians. In 2016, the Pittsburgh symphony conducted a 55-day strike. While the PSO musicians fought courageously their struggle was isolated by the major unions, including the Pittsburgh-based United Steelworkers, and the musicians were forced to take a 7.5 percent wage cut and see their pension plan eliminated and replaced with a 401(k) style retirement plan.

Defying the intransigence of the management, the CSO musicians began a free concert series called “From the Heart of the Orchestra,” all of which have been sold out. Of the three, two were smaller chamber performances. On Monday,

the third concert was a full symphony performance hosted at the new headquarters of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which used the occasion to burnish its own credentials.

The head of the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT), Dan Montgomery, introduced the concert by speaking on behalf of CTU president Jesse Sharkey, saying, “we are honored to stand with you here today in this room.” Montgomery and Sharkey, who was also in attendance, said nothing about the demands of the musicians, and predictably made no call for any strikes or any other action by teachers and other workers to defend the CSO musicians.

While there is broad support for the strikers, the CTU and other Chicago unions have issued nothing but empty words of support for the musicians. For their part, the IFT and the CTU have collaborated with Mayor Rahm Emanuel in unprecedented school closures, the privatization of public education and mass layoffs of teachers while its top executives make six figure salaries (Montgomery makes \$198,567 a year).

The Democratic Party and its political leadership, including the multimillionaire Nancy Pelosi, as well as Chicago mayoral candidate Toni Preckwinkle and former candidate Jesús “Chuy” García, have issued meaningless statements of supposed solidarity. In reality, the Democrats have conspired with Republicans to oversee dramatic cuts to public education and funding for arts and culture over four decades.

Hundreds attended the packed and sold-out free concert on Monday night to see the musicians perform. The crowd was a mixture of young and old who were from varied social backgrounds. The musicians began the night by playing Beethoven’s Overture to Egmont led by CSO trombonist Jay Friedman, followed by Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto in A major and the entirety of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7. Each of the performances was greeted with applause and repeated standing ovations.

The opening Egmont Overture began with an unmistakably defiant note and was performed remarkably by the musicians. Beethoven’s piece is deeply imbued with the heroism of the French Revolution and was composed in the tumultuous era of the Napoleonic wars. There is no mistaking that the piece was itself composed in opposition to tyranny and oppression in Beethoven’s time, a fitting opening for the stand taken by the courageous CSO musicians.

Beethoven’s Seventh is also a remarkable and dazzling work, composed of four movements.

Friedman led the musicians through the sweeping first movement, followed by the haunting second and concluding with the fortissimo close of the fourth which brought the

entire audience to its feet in applause. The performance was both thrilling and deeply moving.

A number of young people and workers traveled from far distances to attend the performance in support of the striking musicians. Zach, a high school student from Geneva, Illinois, said, “Without these musicians, the world would be a lot less colorful. Music humanizes us and is often called the language of the world. There’s no barrier with other cultures. You can play and everyone understands it. It’s not something we have to talk about, but something we can convey with emotion—it’s universal.”

There is broad support for the striking musicians, who are waging a battle of enormous political and cultural significance in defense of art and culture. The forces arrayed against them in the CSO Board and the corporate establishment are bankers, hedge fund managers, and other modern-day aristocrats who usurp the wealth of society at the expense of the vast majority of society’s workers. More broadly, the strike of musicians is taking place in the midst of major eruptions of strikes by teachers and other workers across the world.

Music, let alone art, cannot survive by appealing to the social parasites who control the CSO or to the corporate and political establishment, Democrat or Republican, but by mobilizing the broadest layers of the working class behind the musicians in defense of art, culture and the social rights of the international working class. Instead of squandering of trillions of dollars on imperialist wars and bailing out the financial elite, the ill-gotten gains of the financial elite must be put under the control of the working class. What is needed above all is the socialist reorganization of society to meet human needs, to allow the greatest creative impulses of humanity to truly flourish and blossom.

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