

“We believe in our art and can’t let them take it away”

Chicago symphony musicians defy management offer, continue strike

By Michael Walters and George Marlowe
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On Monday night Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) musicians voted to reject the “last, best and final offer” of management and continue their strike. Now in its fifth week, it is the longest-ever strike in CSO history, with musicians courageously defying the attacks of management on their compensation, retirement benefits and living standards.

Collectively controlling billions of dollars in personal wealth, the heads of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association (CSOA) board have deemed the world-class musicians’ pensions too costly. Historically, the CSO’s contract agreements set precedents for major symphony orchestras nationwide.

The courageous defiance of the musicians against the *noblesse oblige* of the financial aristocracy that runs the board has broad implications for the defense of art and culture. Scheduled concerts have been cancelled at the symphony hall through April 23 while the musicians continue to give free public concerts that have been very popular and well attended.

In their final offer, the CSO board chair Helen Zell cynically noted, “The Board remains committed to achieving a mutually beneficial agreement that honors our extraordinary musicians while finding a path forward for the Association that is sustainable well into the future.” Helen Zell is the wife of real estate mogul and billionaire Sam Zell, whose great fortunes (\$5.5 billion in net worth) were created by parasitically stripping the assets of multiple distressed companies over the decades.

In fact, there is no danger to the financial stability of the orchestra. According to its 2018 annual report, the CSOA board is sitting on almost \$300 million in assets. During the 2018 fiscal year, the CSO’s total operating revenues increased to \$72.7 million with the help of their best year ever in ticket sales at \$23.3 million. As a result of this

success and \$379 million in endowment, other investments and beneficial interest in trusts, the CSO was able to make an optional prepayment on a portion of their long-term bonds.

Details of the final insulting offer include a five-year contract with annual salary increases of 2 percent, 2 percent, 2 percent, 2.5 percent and 3 percent, which amounts to a pay cut when accounting for inflation. The previous contract also imposed salary increases below inflation.

The CSOA board also continues to demand that musicians switch from the defined benefit pension plan to a defined contribution plan in four years, which would erode the future retirement income of current musicians and create a second tier of retirement benefits for new musicians.

Violinist Gina DiBello, who previously played in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and was later locked out by the Minnesota Orchestra, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Their last offer did not meet any of the requests that we had put out. As far as the pension goes, it does not guarantee a benefit for new members coming in. It’s a very loose guarantee, if you can call it that. It’s not a guaranteed benefit plan that they are proposing to us and that’s been a real sticking point. Their wage proposal is not in line with what we had proposed to them. It doesn’t keep up with our peer orchestras.”

As the strike wears on the musicians are increasingly under great financial strain. In order to maintain their health insurance, musicians are forced to pay their own premiums out of pocket. Speaking to the *Chicago Tribune*, the chair of the musicians negotiating committee Stephen Lester said, “For a family, that’s sometimes \$3,000 per month. Obviously, we have no (CSO) income; that’s a real hardship.” Musicians’ premiums are higher

than other insurance groups due to the likelihood of repetitive stress injuries.

The fact that musicians have to contribute anything at all to their health insurance is a recent phenomenon and the result of decades of corporate claw-backs. In 1991, the CSO musicians waged a 17-day strike against a management that was dead set on forcing them to contribute toward their insurance premiums. At the time, this was unheard of for a major US orchestra and full management payment for health care had been a part of CSO contracts since the 1960s.

Neither pensions nor 401(k) style retirement plans can provide a guaranteed secure retirement for musicians, let alone most workers today. Both are subject to the gyrations of Wall Street and the financial markets. As with the attacks on workers' pensions, the musicians' pensions have been underfunded. Defined contribution and 401(k) style plans rely on employees to self-manage their investments, which shifts all the risks into their hands.

The board has also been utilizing rather abstruse actuarial calculations to confuse the musicians and the public about the viability of their retirement benefits. "It's a super complicated plan that doesn't actually meet our needs," DiBello noted.

"The board absolutely has money," she added. "They just don't want to take on the risk. They've shown time and time again that the orchestra is not the most important thing to them, but their bottom line. But that's not what the Chicago symphony is about. It's about keeping the highest artistic standard—being one of the leaders in the world. This is a real philosophical fight about that. We believe in our art and we believe in preserving this art form and can't let them take it away. It shows a real lack of vision for what they want to do in the future. It diminishes the quality of the orchestra."

The strike of CSO musicians initially brought an endless parade of phony support from Democratic politicians including mayoral candidate Toni Preckwinkle, city council candidate Rossana Rodriguez Sanchez, Senator Dick Durbin and Representative Chuy Garcia, as well as various union representatives from the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL), the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Despite their empty calls for support and solidarity, since the conclusion of the Chicago municipal elections, the strike has largely been isolated and abandoned.

Nonetheless, CSO musicians have received an outpouring of international support from workers,

musicians, artists, filmmakers and broad sections of the population in their struggle to defend their pensions, salaries and other benefits. Orchestra members have given multiple successful free concerts entitled, "From the Heart of the Orchestra." These well-attended performances have been held in a variety of neighborhoods and locations across the Chicago metropolitan region.

An autoworker spoke to the WSWS, expressing her support for the musicians: "Contrary to those who claim that 'regular' people don't like classical music, there's lots of support for it, when it's financially accessible. Symphonies get a good response when they tour schools, senior centers and other public places. Artists are very important to society and should be paid what they're worth. The rich just want to get rid of art in general, because it helps people to think about the situation they're in. There's a reason Hitler destroyed so called 'degenerate' art. Art gives people something to aspire to, and those who rule us don't like that."

"Music is a different way of communication," Gina DiBello said. "From a human perspective, it uses a different part of your brain, heart and soul to listen to something and be moved by that. It is this universal language that touches everyone."

Immense support exists for the musicians. But for their struggle to be successful, CSO musicians must above all appeal to the working class. Workers, youth and sections of the middle class are increasingly fed up with the state of affairs where funding for the arts, education and the living standards of the majority have been decimated by the financial aristocrats and billionaires of today. Such a fight for access to arts and culture above all demands a political struggle against a decaying capitalist social order that puts profits above human needs.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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