

“Capitalism is a terrible scheme that robs people of their labor”

As negotiations hit impasse, Chicago Symphony Orchestra musicians continue strike and free concerts

By Michael Walters and George Marlowe
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Musicians of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) are entering the seventh week of their longest-ever strike. It has been almost two weeks since the musicians rejected management’s “last, best and final” offer, which would have destroyed their defined-benefit pensions and imposed a de facto pay cut through below-inflation salary increases.

On Tuesday, when the musicians’ negotiating committee met with management, talks broke down again. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association (CSOA) board, controlled by billionaires and the city’s financial aristocrats, did not budge on their demands on pensions or salary. Intent on wearing down the musicians, management has also canceled all performances through the end of April.

On Thursday, cellist David Sanders told the WSWs, “All the members of the orchestra, at least 86 people, rejected their offer a week ago. Our lawyer called their lawyer and told them it’s been rejected. Then we negotiated again two days ago. It was a sham. We came with a compromise. They said, ‘No, we can’t possibly do this. You have our “last, best and final offer.”’

“Next week performances have been canceled,” Sanders added. “[Chicago Symphony Orchestra music director Riccardo] Muti comes back for the spring series, but that hasn’t been canceled yet. Why do they ask us what we wanted if they reject our offers? All these board members also run companies that take away pensions.”

Sanders, who is on the musicians negotiating committee of the Chicago Federation of Musicians (CFM), was joined on the pickets Thursday by veteran trombonist Jay Friedman, assistant principal oboist Michael Hensch and others. Friedman, Sanders and Hensch have performed

for more than four decades with world-renowned conductors Georg Solti, Daniel Barenboim and even with legendary American conductor, composer and musical educator Leonard Bernstein in 1988.

If the changes and concessions demanded by the CSOA were imposed, the musicians’ living standards would be greatly affected and it would also give a green light to further attacks on orchestras and arts organizations across the country and internationally.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the financial aristocracy and the political establishment have damaged or destroyed orchestras and arts organizations through budget cuts, layoffs and outright closures. The trade unions—including the AFL-CIO, the teachers unions, the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Teamsters—have played a treacherous role in smothering workers’ opposition and isolating struggles, including strikes by musicians.

CSO musicians have admirably rejected the claim there is no money for pensions or for funding a world-class orchestra. Vast sums have been squandered by the political establishment on endless wars. A tiny layer of society has enriched itself at the expense of the working class and the overwhelming majority of the population.

Despite increasing financial hardship, including having to pay as much as \$3,000 a month for health insurance, the musicians remain on strike and continue to perform free concerts attended by thousands of supporters.

On Monday, the striking musicians performed to a rapt audience of over 3,500 people at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago’s south side neighborhood of Woodlawn. Concertmaster and violin soloist Robert Chen and guest conductor Jay Friedman led the orchestra. The orchestra

performed Gioachino Rossini's overture to *The Seville*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 In A Major and Johannes Brahms' Symphony No. 4 in E Minor. Standing ovations followed each item on the program.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several of the concert attendees Monday night.

Ben and Emerson are student musicians in the University of Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Both are first-year students.

"We're out here as a community," said Emerson, who plays the French horn. "They said before the show started that they are 'our symphony.' You can just see the crowd here. It's really great that it's a free concert, and so many people who normally don't get to experience classical music come out. It's a really good thing that brings people together."

"We are big fans of classical music and we love the CSO," said Ben, a violinist. "Art is therapeutic," he added. "It helps people and it's beautiful. It's not just aesthetic, it's important to people. It has a special place in people's hearts and it's irreplaceable."

Speaking about the musicians' strike, Ben explained that "we value them as musicians and their rights are important. So I respect them for fighting for that."

Originally from Philadelphia, Emerson compared the CSO strike to the two-day strike of Philadelphia Orchestra musicians in 2016, which ended in concessions over pay, benefits and performance schedules.

"I know a lot of the members of the Philadelphia orchestra," Emerson said. "They went on strike and I went to their opening night concert where they walked out. I support them in their endeavors."

"I'm from North Carolina," Ben said. "And even my teachers in the North Carolina symphony are talking about the ways in which [the CSO strike] affects them. So it's not just the CSO on strike. Every musician is being touched by this for sure."

He added, "I think the definition of art is that it can't be limited, right? It's for everyone. It's bringing this community together in a way that I've not seen in my short time here."

Christian and Cassandra expressed their enthusiasm for the performance. "This is actually a treat. We normally are at the cultural center or downtown. It was absolutely wonderful," said Cassandra.

Preyas is a musician who also supports the CSO musicians strike. Speaking about the performance he said, "It was spectacular. They are a world-class orchestra."

Speaking of the musicians' demands, he went on, "My understanding is they need more security in their contracts and they deserve it. They are the best in the world. This tradition of music can only be preserved through large orchestras. Large orchestras are not going to be profitable. It's a lot of world-class musicians."

"The amount of work it takes to make music like this deserves to be compensated. I'm biased because I'm a musician, but societies have to support their artists and musicians. In Chicago, we are fortunate to have a spectacular orchestra and I think we should support them."

"When funding for the arts is cut," he continued, "fewer artists are able to engage the full extent of their creativity. They are limited to whatever is commercially viable. They are limited to whatever pays the bills. In order to have great art, you need to pay the artist's bills. They need to eat if they are going to create."

"In addition to funding for the arts, funding for arts and music education could go a long way toward making American society more amenable to funding the arts. Two generations ago music appreciation was standard in all schools. The music of the era reflected that. Musicians could be more adventurous because they were playing for an appreciative audience. Today the extent of what's commercially viable has shrunk tremendously."

Preyas also spoke out against the corporate stranglehold over all aspects of social life, including the arts.

"Money is the root of all evil," he said. "I believe in collectivization, workers rights and limiting to the greatest extent possible the free flow of capital. I think the idea that free markets lead to free people is a lie. I think capitalism is a terrible scheme that robs people of their labor. These musicians are a perfect example. They put their lives into this. They dedicated tens of thousands of hours into being the absolute best in the world at their instruments and capitalism doesn't recognize that."

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