

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra musicians reject contract proposals, launch strike

By Dmitri Church and Harvey Simpkins
17 September 2019

On September 10, the musicians of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra voted down two contract proposals from the symphony's Board of Directors. The workers, who have been locked out since June 16, are now on strike, refusing to return to work on September 9 when the Board reopened the symphony for the fall concert season.

The conflict between the musicians and management continues to center on the Board's unilateral cancellation of the 2019 summer season, with management insisting on a permanent end to all future summer sessions. Most of the musicians have not been paid since June 14, after the BSO's Board unilaterally eliminated the summer season and then locked out the musicians. The musicians have each lost about \$20,000 in pay due to the lockout.

On September 9, BSO management presented the musicians with two contract options. The first, for a one-year contract to expire on August 31, 2020, would make permanent a 40-week season, create a small stipend to pay the musicians over the summer, and pay each musician a share of \$1 million donated to the BSO specifically to supplement the income lost during the summer.

According to the *Baltimore Sun*, with the addition of the \$1 million donation, the musicians would be paid approximately what they received under the expired contract. That contract expired in January 2019. The musicians rejected the offer both because there was no guarantee beyond the first year that their salaries would be paid in full and their insistence that the summer session be restored.

The second option offered by the Board would have extended the expired contract for four months, through December 31, but made no provision for the \$2.5 million in lost musician pay and benefits during the summer lockout. According to Brian Prechtel, a percussionist with the BSO, and co-chair of the Baltimore Symphony

Musicians Players Committee, the musicians overwhelmingly rejected both proposals.

A statement posted to Facebook by the musicians described it as a "dark day" for the BSO. Despite being locked out for three months, the musicians remained resolute in defense of their livelihood, saying they "will continue the fight to preserve our 103-year old institution, which serves the City of Baltimore, the surrounding counties and the State of Maryland." The statement continues:

"This dispute isn't just about money. It is also about respect, respect for the quality of the musicians on stage, respect for generations of Marylanders who have built this orchestra and for the thousands of people who have bought tickets and have donated to this venerable institution."

Many fans and community members expressed support for the musicians and denounced management in the comments. One wrote, "I am outraged and heartbroken that the world-class musicians of this great orchestra are being treated so badly, as well as their precious audience members and supporters. I will continue to believe in the long-term flourishing of the orchestra, but I am so sorry for this painful period of uncertainty and injustice. Sending support. Will return to stand on the picket line with you. Honored to do so." Many others expressed that the current management should be replaced.

The situation for symphony workers at the BSO and the attack on the right to culture is part of a national trend. While unlimited funds are provided for the military and local police departments, the already meager funding for the arts is routinely slashed. In the BSO's case, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation providing an additional \$1.6 million for it in the 2020 fiscal year budget and another \$1.6 million for the following year. However, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan refused to release the funds, which represent more than half the

wages and benefits lost by the musicians during the lockout. Prechtl told the *Baltimore Sun* that if the additional state funding was made available, “We would be at work this week. I can guarantee it.”

Orchestras throughout the country are routinely starved of public funding. To name only a few examples, the nearby National Philharmonic, which performs at Strathmore in North Bethesda, Maryland, nearly shut down this summer due to financial difficulties, and earlier this year the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was on strike for two months after management there sought massive cuts in musicians’ pay to overcome funding shortfalls. In 2012-2013, the Minnesota orchestra cancelled a complete season because of lack of funding and, in 2010-2011, Detroit musicians launched a six-month strike to fight a proposed 30 percent wage cut, as management sought to overcome a \$3.8 million deficit at the expense of the musicians.

In comments to the *Baltimore Sun*, Michael Kaiser, chairman of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland—named for the billionaire family of Trump’s education secretary—stated, “This is an American problem. Many symphonies have gone bankrupt. Miami has no major symphony. San Antonio’s symphony almost closed a year ago. The next 10 to 20 years are going to be a transitional period for orchestras.”

The comment went on to complain that orchestras will never enjoy the improvements in productivity that have made auto companies and other large corporations billions in profits, callously describing the right of musicians to decent wages as “the cost disease.”

The BSO musicians have accused management of negotiating in bad faith and have filed an unfair labor practice complaint with the National Labor Relations Board in an attempt to force the BSO Board to negotiate in “good faith.” However, in order to win support and force BSO management to better contract terms, musicians, like the working class generally, cannot rely on the NLRB. The remedies for “bad faith” bargaining are almost meaningless (generally, merely an order, months or years down the road, that an employer return to the bargaining table).

To carry forward the strike, BSO musicians must make the widest possible appeal to other symphony musicians and, more broadly, to workers and students throughout the city and state. Last week, musicians were joined on their picket lines by students at the Maryland Institute College of Art. This represents a step forward in broadening the struggle.

The musicians’ strike also takes place among a massive upsurge of working-class militancy in the United States and globally. On Monday, 46,000 autoworkers at General Motors went on strike. Autoworkers at Fiat Chrysler and Ford have also authorized strike action, as have 65,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente in California, Colorado and Oregon, which could take place as early as October 1. Another 15,000 Kaiser Permanente workers in Maryland, Virginia, the District of Columbia, and California are voting on strike action on September 22. It is to this upsurge of the working class that striking BSO musicians must turn.

During their strike, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra sent a powerful message by playing free concerts, engaging many members of the community who would not otherwise have the opportunity to hear orchestral music live. BSO musicians are doing the same. On Saturday, they performed a concert before a packed audience at New Shiloh Baptist Church in impoverished west Baltimore. This refutes claims by some that classical music is the province only of the rich, and that the working class is not interested in such performances.

The majority of people in Baltimore and around the world do not want to see classical music confined to recordings and academic study. It is up to musicians to connect their struggle with the struggle of workers globally for better wages. As capital abandons any cultivation of the arts in a blind pursuit of profit, only the working class can ensure that human culture continues to develop.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>