

The assault on culture and the crisis of American capitalism

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The strike by members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), which began Monday, is a politically and socially significant event. The players walked out in the face of management demands that would mean a severe decline in living standards—a 33 percent cut in base pay and reduction in the pay for new-hires of 42 percent, along with sharply reduced health coverage and a freeze in pensions.

As well, the orchestra is insisting that the musicians carry out all manner of nonperforming duties, turning them into what a players' representative described as "servants."

The Detroit Symphony has a long and illustrious history, dating back to 1914, and is regularly ranked among the finest orchestras in the US. The ongoing economic crisis has devastated the state of Michigan and the city of Detroit. The orchestra faces a \$9 million budget deficit, as ticket sales have fallen, along with private donations. According to the *New York Times*, "Banks will no longer lend it [the DSO] money...and it is raiding its endowment to pay for operations."

The crisis at the DSO is part of a national phenomenon. Budgets for arts groups and arts education are under relentless attack from governments in the US at all levels, while wealthy individuals and corporations are reducing their financial gifts. Pay cuts have been imposed at symphony orchestras in Phoenix, Houston, Cincinnati, Seattle, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Baltimore, Atlanta, Virginia, North Carolina and Utah, among other cities and states.

One third of museum directors in the US had taken pay cuts by October 2009, along with thousands of museum employees.

Thirty-one state arts agencies predict decreases in funding for 2011. Arts appropriations at the state level have declined 34.7 percent in the past decade. When adjusted for inflation, the 10-year decrease is just over 45 percent.

The entire federal contribution to some 100,000 not-for-profit arts groups in fiscal year 2009—through the National Endowment for the Arts—added up to \$155 million (a day or two of spending on the Afghanistan war). The NEA budget in 1978 was \$123 million, or \$416 million in current dollars.

American capitalism in decline has neither interest in, nor financial support to offer, artistic creation. In more prosperous times, the corporate elite felt there was a certain prestige value in subsidizing various educational and cultural activities. Now the aristocracy that rules the US views every dollar not accruing to itself to be a waste and even something of an affront. Cultural life in America is in serious danger from the vandals who sit in boardrooms and legislative chambers.

The notion that "the money is no longer there" (*Detroit News*) to support an orchestra—or a library or a public school for that matter—in Detroit, or anywhere else in America, is ludicrous. The financial markets and corporate coffers are awash in trillions. The *News* argues that "Working harder for less money is not an easy thing to accept. But it's what the community that supports the DSO has had to do over the past decade."

Which community? The very wealthy in Michigan (and in the US as a whole) are wealthier than ever. Bloomfield Hills, north of Detroit, ranks number four on the list of highest-income places in America with a population of more than 1,000—even as median household income in Michigan has plunged more than 21 percent over the last decade and Detroit's official poverty rate has reached 36 percent.

In 2006, *Forbes* listed 8 billionaires in Michigan worth \$16.5 billion. This year the magazine points to 10 billionaires worth \$21 billion (a 22 percent increase).

The pseudo-populist attempt to pit DSO players, and other professionals, against lower-paid workers should be rejected with contempt. The interests of the latter are only championed by the media when it comes to beating down

the efforts of slightly better-off sections of the population to defend their gains and rights.

The socially decisive differences in income are not between those making \$30,000 and those making \$130,000, but between this entire class of wage- and salary-earners and the superrich who individually loot the economy to the tune of millions, and in the case of Wall Street hedge fund managers, *billions* of dollars a year!

Governments in the US have never adequately supported or funded the arts. On the one hand, the philistine ideologists of “free enterprise” have insisted that artists place themselves entirely at the mercy of the market, i.e., their ability to turn out work that yields profit, and have demanded that artists not be subsidized by the “taxpayers.” The miserable consequences of that can be seen in the current offerings of the for-profit film (Hollywood) and theater (Broadway) industries.

On the other hand, corporations and rich individuals were expected to make up the gap by their beneficence. According to the NEA in 2007, private donations accounted for some 43 percent of not-for-profit arts groups’ income, with governments providing only 13 percent.

This dependence on the largess of the wealthy is degrading and intellectually restrictive in the best of times. In a period of crisis, it threatens catastrophe. Now the very presence of music, art and drama in a given community may depend on the financial vicissitudes of the ultra-rich.

To point out to the bankers and CEOs, the people who “count” in America, that art is one of those activities whose creation and enjoyment renders human beings *human*, that it is essential to the life and well-being of an enlightened and sensitive people, that reducing the influence of artistic creativity will materially blight the lives of those deprived of it, is an entirely futile endeavor. Such arguments would only be met by blank stares.

The effort to slash the wages and benefits of the symphony musicians in Detroit and elsewhere, backed to the hilt in the big business media, ought to be instructive from another point of view. In effect, the musicians now find themselves in the same position as millions of auto workers, teachers and other workers. They may have thought themselves “professionals,” perpetually insulated from the kind of assault on living standards and jobs so many workers in the US and around the world have known, but the current situation is helping to clarify matters.

In the eyes of the ruling elite and its media, the DSO

members *are* “servants,” expected to function under conditions dictated to them by management. Their strike action, which should be fully supported by every worker and student, is also part of a growing movement of resistance by the working class to the attempt to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on their backs.

As Leon Trotsky explained years ago, the period in which artists enjoyed relatively free rein, and received backing from the powers that be, existed on the same historical plane as the granting of “special privileges to the top layer of the working class.” The destruction of auto workers’ pay and benefits has inevitably preceded and facilitated the frontal assault on the Detroit musicians and other artists.

In the final analysis, the DSO confrontation expresses a stark reality: the survival and progress of art in America are incompatible with the corporate stranglehold over every important aspect of life. The wealth exists in abundance to fund every serious arts group in the US and provide every Detroit orchestra member, as well as popular music performers, painters, photographers, poets, and dancers, with secure economic conditions. But that wealth is jealously monopolized by a handful.

The DSO strike is not simply or even primarily a trade union conflict. It is a political and cultural struggle with enormous implications. The only genuine answer to the attacks on the orchestra musicians lies in conscious opposition to the attacks of the corporate elite, a rejection of their arguments and propaganda, and the emergence of an avowedly socialist movement among workers, professionals and students.

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