

National Symphony Orchestra musicians back to work after brief strike in Washington DC

Fred Mazelis
29 September 2024

The National Symphony Orchestra (NSO), based at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, announced the settlement late Friday of a strike by its musicians that lasted less than a day. The musicians' strike, the first in 46 years at the Washington orchestra, threatened to force the cancellation of the orchestra's opening night gala, scheduled for the very next day.

The orchestra players, angry over givebacks during the height of the pandemic, were demanding modest pay increases of 6.25 percent annually over a four-year contract. They pointed to the annual pay of the orchestra's president, Deborah Rutter—\$1.3 million. Management replied that the musicians' demands were not "financially viable," and offered only 12 percent in increases over four years. The orchestra claimed it did not have the resources of other well-known ensembles. The endowment of the NSO, as reported in the *Washington Post*, is \$52 million, compared to \$237 million in New York, \$414 million in Los Angeles and \$495 million in Boston. The two sides had been negotiating since May with no resolution in sight. The musicians, numbering more than 90, voted unanimously last week to strike.

The settlement provided meager 4 percent raises this year and next, in an 18-month agreement that appeared to have a somewhat interim character. "This 18-month contract will provide all parties time to come together to settle a longer-term agreement that demonstrates our respect for their artistic contributions and maintains the orchestra's competitiveness in the field," the orchestra said in a statement. The orchestra and musicians will be negotiating again when 2026 arrives. The musicians will be earning base pay of \$172,000 by the second year of the agreement but will still be below the pay

levels of other top-tier orchestras, including those in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Cleveland.

The National Symphony was founded 94 years ago, and its reputation rose especially under Mstislav Rostropovich, the famous Russian cellist and conductor who led it from 1977 to 1994. Other leaders of the symphony since then have included the American Leonard Slatkin, the German-based Christoph Eschenbach and its current conductor, the Italian Gianandrea Noseda. The NSO affiliated to the Kennedy Center in 1986, giving it more prominence and something of a semi-official character. Its board includes billionaires like Roger Sant of AES and other wealthy figures.

The strike settlement was announced on Friday, after growing tension over the previous few days. The Washington National Opera musicians and those of the Kennedy Center Opera joined in solidarity with their NSO colleagues. According to the *Post*, however, these musicians had just ratified contracts calling for only 9 percent over 3 years.

On Tuesday, the cancellation of three days of concerts by singer Sara Bareilles was averted at the last minute, after she declared her solidarity with the musicians, and they agreed to a three-day extension of talks. When some NSO musicians began to distribute informational leaflets about the contract struggle to those attending Tuesday's concert, however, Kennedy Center security ordered them to leave or face removal by the police.

The new agreement doesn't come close to restoring the concessions agreed to by the NSO musicians earlier in the pandemic, when they each sacrificed \$60,000 in earnings. Even before the pandemic, the economics of

the privately funded classical music world, underwritten by multimillionaires and billionaires, had led to cutbacks and concessions for orchestra musicians.

Bitter strikes have taken place in the past period, including the 6-month struggle at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 2010-2011, as well as strikes in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago and elsewhere. Some orchestras in smaller or mid-sized US cities, including in Honolulu, Albuquerque and Syracuse, have gone out of existence.

Two year ago, San Antonio became the largest US city (ranked seventh nationally and second largest in the South) to lose its orchestra. In some cases, the musicians have reorganized into newly formed ensembles.

As important as is the struggle facing the NSO musicians and those at other large orchestras, the fact is that the great majority of professionally trained musicians are unable to earn a full-time living in the field they have chosen and studied for. There are thousands of excellent players in major population centers in all parts of the country who are paid part-time salaries and are forced to supplement their pay by teaching or other jobs unrelated to music. The solution to this continuing crisis will only come through the unification of all working class struggles based on the socialist reorganization of economic life.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact