

# New York City Ballet musicians on strike

**Allen Whyte**  
**1 December 1999**

The opening night performance of the New York City Ballet was canceled when its 70-member orchestra went on strike Tuesday night, their first strike in 23 years. Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians voted 51 to 2 for strike action. Their contract expired September 6.

The major issue in the dispute is not money, but scheduling. The management of the ballet company is demanding more attendance by the musicians for rehearsals and performances. Specifically, they want the orchestra members to attend six performances and two rehearsals a week.

Under the terms of the old contract musicians were allowed to find substitutes. Many of them do other work to supplement their income, working as teachers or at other jobs in the music industry, making scheduling flexibility essential. According to the union, the base salary of a musician is \$35,000 per year for 23 weeks of work.

On Friday night, management decided to go ahead with a scheduled performance of "The Nutcracker," with dancers performing to a musical tape. This is the first time in the history of the City Ballet that the Tchaikovsky classic was staged without live musical accompaniment. A spokesman for the American Guild of Musical Artists representing the dancers at the City Ballet has stated that they were compelled to perform due to a no-strike clause in their contract. The same spokesman also said that other unionized professionals have clauses that prohibit a sympathy strike with the orchestra.

While few patrons apparently demanded their money back, many were upset that they had been subjected to canned music. The striking musicians were not allowed to picket in front of the New York State Theater for the 8 p.m. show. Police did not allow picketing in any part of the plaza at Lincoln Center, and kept the strikers on the sidewalks about 30 yards away.

The union had agreed to play through the winter holiday season as negotiations continued. However, management demanded that the orchestra continue playing until the spring, in case they were still not able to reach a settlement. Since the union is willing to end the strike immediately and perform, their officials assert that they now consider the orchestra to be locked out by the City Ballet.

The ballet company is offering financial incentives to all the musicians who elect to work under the strict new guidelines for attendance. However, the sticking point is their demand that while they will allow the current musicians to continue operating under the traditional standards, the newly hired ones would be forced to work under the strict new attendance rules. The union has rejected this because it would create a two-tiered system of pay and working conditions for its members.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**