

Union bows to producers' job-cutting

## Broadway musicians end strike on 'minimums'

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After a four-day strike that shut down 18 musicals on Broadway and won strong support from other theater workers as well as the general public, the musicians' union leadership agreed to a tentative settlement that will further cut jobs as well as the quality of the performances presented on the New York stage.

The settlement was reached under extraordinary pressure from the producers, the city and the media. Estimates were released of losses to New York's economy amounting to more than \$2 million a day, with predictions that a lengthy strike could seriously affect tourism. New York's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg demanded that the two sides submit to round-the-clock bargaining Monday night, bringing in former New York City Schools Chancellor Frank Macchiarola as a mediator. Within 12 hours, a deal was announced.

Bloomberg invoked the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as well as the shooting Monday of two New York City cops in Staten Island in his appeal for an immediate end to the dispute.

For many musicians, as well as their supporters among the actors, stagehands, composers and directors, the key issue in the strike—the first in nearly three decades on Broadway—was a matter not only of livelihood but of principle. The defense of “minimums”—union rules requiring a certain number of seats in the pit orchestras—was seen as a battle to preserve the last vestiges of artistic integrity against the ever-encroaching profit interests of Broadway producers.

Having made preparations to keep their shows running by bringing in “virtual orchestras”—pre-recorded music together with synthesizers and computers—the producers were taken aback by the refusal of stagehands and actors to cross the musicians' picket lines. While the producers had expected both Actors Equity and Local 1, the stagehands' union, to continue working, there was immense pressure from the rank and file to support the strike. During the first day of the musicians' walkout on Friday, stagehands asked pickets to show up at their theater entrances at work time, saying that they would not cross.

A host of prominent actors, composers and other professionals backed the strikers, including: Patty Duke, Tom Wopat, Judy Kaye, Marin Alsop, Sally Struthers, Bette Midler, Jonathan Schwartz, Tony Danza, John Pizzarelli, Chita Rivera, Joel Grey, Sheldon Harnick, James Naughton, Robert Goulet, Christine Baranski, Jerry Herman, Harvey Fierstein, Andrea McArdle,

Karen Ziemba, John Kander and John Cullum.

While management had cast its drive to slash costs by cutting orchestra seats as a blow for “artistic freedom” against dictatorial union rules, the great majority of directors, composers and orchestrators signed petitions backing the musicians' union and insisting that without the minimums they would be left at the mercy of profit-hungry producers demanding that they do away with live music entirely.

The anger directed at the producers stemmed from their ruthless determination to squeeze the musicians out of the musicals. They denounced the requirement to hire a minimum number of producers not only as “archaic” but “un-American.” On the eve of the contract expiration, the producers held rehearsals using “virtual orchestras,” canned musical accompaniment to demonstrate their ability to dispense with live musicians altogether. When actors protested, they were threatened with a court injunction if they failed to participate.

Many theater workers also recalled that after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks reduced tourism and shrunk audiences, the musicians agreed to take a 25 percent pay cut to get Broadway back on its feet. Now the theaters are racking up record receipts.

Despite this broad support—as well as the evident sympathy of theatergoers, who voiced revulsion over the idea of replacing musicians with “canned” music—the union ended up caving in to a settlement that will severely reduce the number of jobs and further impair the quality of music on Broadway.

The deal in essence will cut the number of jobs for Broadway musicians by 25 percent in exchange for a guarantee that the reduced “minimums” will remain in place for 10 years. In the 13 largest theaters, the numbers go down from the current 24 to 26, to 18 and 19. In eight of the smaller theaters, the minimum will be only three.

It is estimated that at the largest theaters, the slashing of orchestra seats will save producers at least \$600,000 a year.

Even these reduced numbers are by no means solid. Part of the tentative pact includes the introduction of greater “flexibility” in a Special Situation Committee created 10 years ago, which allows producers to apply for a waiver for musicals that they believe do not require the minimum number of musicians set by the contract. Out of 20 applications made to this committee, 17 have been granted, while in the other three cases producers just ignored the

panel's ruling. Apparently, applications will now bypass the union, going directly to a panel of "neutrals."

Many union members fear this greasing of the wheels for producers seeking waivers will effectively render the minimums null and void. The contract must still be submitted to the rank and file for ratification, and there are indications that there is substantial opposition.

Affected by this job cutting are not only the more than 325 musicians' jobs currently existing on Broadway, but thousands of musicians who apply for these jobs. Many of them receive part-time work as substitutes (substitutions are fairly frequent as musicians must meet other commitments), or work on shows that open and close in short order, earning the rest of their livings doing other jobs or teaching music.

The settlement essentially means that musicians will be competing for an even smaller pool of orchestra seats and that the opportunities for young professional musicians seeking to pursue their careers will be further diminished.

Anger over the terms of the settlement appeared widespread among rank-and-file musicians who returned to work Tuesday night. One musician referred to the deal as a "contract of mass destruction." Another commented, "If I were a stagehand or an actor, I'd be wondering what I stuck my neck out for."

A musician who wrote Tuesday to the *World Socialist Web Site* said: "For some reason we are going to play shows tonight with no contract, no ratification meeting and no vote.... The numbers don't look good to me; from what I'm hearing it sounds like quite a loss of musicians' chairs to increase the profits of some of the wealthiest people on the planet."

The rapid collapse of the American Federation of Musicians Local 802 leadership was all the more extraordinary given the evident strength of the strike and the determination of the rank-and-file musicians. Indeed, union officials saw the success of the walkout as a tremendous pressure to call it off. The fact that other unions had honored their picket lines, that the theaters were completely shut down and that the strike was exerting substantial economic pressure on both the industry and the city were all cited by officials as reasons why it had to be ended as quickly as possible.

They were not prepared to wage the kind of lengthy and difficult struggle it would take to defeat the producers' attacks and, above all, were unprepared to answer politically the tremendous pressure exerted by the government and the media.

The core issues of the strike are themselves deeply political and raise profound questions about the relation of the arts to the profit system. The accelerating drive by the producers to destroy jobs in order to increase profit margins is bound up with a systematic destruction of artistic content on Broadway in the interest of the bottom line.

Ticket prices have already risen to a rate that is beyond the reach of much of New York City's population, while creativity and originality are strongly discouraged if not utterly destroyed by a system that will bet only on what is seen as the safest commodity—revivals, musicalizations of films, shows strung together around pop hits, TV stars, etc. The profit motive dictates that culture be dumbed down to the lowest common denominator.

This trend has led already on Broadway to an insidious degradation of the live musical content of performances. Even with the old minimums, orchestras today are far smaller than they were in the musical's hey day, with musicians forced to play multiple instruments. To compensate for the reduced size, synthesizers and amplification—often either tinny or blaring—have been brought into the orchestra pits.

The system that has brought about these changes, and the entertainment corporations that are now seeking to milk increased profits out of Broadway musicals by replacing musicians with machines, cannot be beaten back based on a trade union perspective, no matter how militant.

The defense of jobs for musicians as well as the quality and availability of live music is ultimately a political and social question. It requires the creation of a system of public support for the arts that would make possible a vast expansion of what is available in terms of music, theater and other artistic forms, while also creating the conditions to make it accessible to a far wider audience than those currently paying \$100 for a seat in a Broadway theater.

What made so many who walked the picket lines see the musicians strike as a "cause," rather than merely an economic dispute, is the connection between the issues raised on Broadway and far broader social questions. These include the immense polarization between wealth and poverty in America and the relentless drive to subordinate all of society—including music, art and culture—to the creation of greater wealth for a thin layer at the top.

These questions can be answered only through an independent political struggle by the broad mass of working people for the transformation of the present social order and its replacement with a system based on human need, not profit. This would include placing the entertainment industry under public ownership and the democratic control of those who work in it.



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