Union orders Broadway actors to stay on job despite contract expiration

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Despite failing to reach a contractual agreement with the League of American Theaters and Producers by Sunday midnight, the Actors Equity Association has not called its members out on strike. The union issued a statement on its web site stating that negotiations broke down when the representatives for the producers walked out of the negotiations at 10:45 p.m.

An Actors Equity representative speaking off the record said that League negotiators left the room as someone from the union was talking, attempting to respond to a lengthy presentation from the producers. Equity also said that the producers never explained why they decided to break off talks in this manner a little more than an hour before the contract deadline. A spokesman for the theaters said that talks ended because they had ceased making any progress, but nevertheless indicated that negotiations should continue.

The union, on its web site, instructed its members "to report to work at their theatres until the Council convenes this week to determine a course of action. Actors Equity will keep Broadway and the road lit!" The council is the governing body of the union, and it decides whether the union members will strike or not.

The major issues in dispute for both Broadway and on-tour shows include wages, health care benefits, job safety, and the producers increasing use of nonunion actors. Due to a press blackout imposed by both sides in the dispute, no details have been released as to what contractual disagreements caused the breakdown in the negotiations. Earlier in the day, both sides issued a joint statement indicating they were close to achieving a settlement.

The union membership voted by a 98 percent majority to authorize a strike if there were no agreement by Sunday, when the current contract expired. Despite this, the union leadership is under enormous pressure to prevent a walkout precisely because it would be at a time when it would be most effective, during the summer when tourism in New York is at its highest and people go to see Broadway plays.

Maria Somma, a spokeswoman for the union, told ABC News, "It's important for the city's economy and we're very, very aware that this is the tourist season and taking a strike is the last resort."

The musicians union went on a four-day strike in March of last year shutting down 18 Broadway musicals. The walkout cost the city an estimated $2 million a day. As a result, the mayor put enormous pressure on the union to reach an agreement that it is estimated reduced union jobs by 25 percent. A strike by the actors now would shut down about 25 Broadway shows, including some major box-office hits, such as "Avenue Q, and "A Raisin in the Sun."

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