# US actors vote overwhelmingly for strike authorization

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Actors voted last week by a 98 percent majority to strike if there is no settlement with the League of American Theaters and Producers by June 27, when the current contract expires. The strike authorization was voted by the Actors' Equity Association. A spokeswoman for the union said the vote is "a standard procedural step and does not mean that there will be a strike." The union's governing council will make the final decision on whether to walk out or not.

A joint statement issued by the League and Actors' Equity appeared on the union's web site asserting that the two sides have agreed to impose a media blackout on negotiations. However, it has been reported that the major issues in dispute involve health care and the producers' use of non-union actors who are paid less than union members.

The current production contract that covers actors in New York's Broadway productions as well as those performing in national tours has been in effect for four years. The major issue is the League's growing use of non-union actors on road shows. Frequently, the League will employ Equity actors for a Broadway production and then employ non-Equity performers when the show goes on the road. Road productions have reduced the percentage of union actors from 90 percent to 60 percent in the last 10 years.

The producers, however, have sought to exploit a deal made by the union with Troika Presentations, a producer that is not a member of the League, which allows it to use non-union actors. Equity has maintained that it reached this agreement with Troika because this producer opened its books revealing financial difficulties, and that it also increased wages for union members as part of the deal.

Another issue is a huge deficit confronting Equity's health care fund. Though the deficit reflects the skyrocketing costs of health care nationwide, it also is a product of the growing use of non-union actors. Since the producers contribute to the health insurance fund of the union, with fewer Equity actors working there is less money going into the fund. Actors must now work 20 weeks a year instead of what was previously 10 to be covered by the union's health care plan. As a result, many have lost their benefits. Equity is asking the League to increase its contributions to the health fund.

The League, on the other hand, is seeking to reduce the wages for union actors on road shows. The League has stated that it has already achieved an agreement with the Broadway stagehands' union that has made it possible for workers to receive lower wages when on tour.

Actors' Equity has 45,000 union members nationwide. Those voting in the current dispute included some 6,000 actors who have worked under the union's contract either on Broadway or in road shows during the past eight years.

It is expected that any settlement reached between the two sides will establish a pattern not only for the rest of Equity's members, but also for workers from the other unions that are involved in all the aspects of stage, television and film production. As a result, the New York local of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) Local 802 passed resolutions supporting Actors' Equity.

The musicians staged a four-day strike in March of last year. With the support of the stagehands and actors, who refused to cross the picket lines, the walkout closed down 18 Broadway musicals. The musicians confronted issues similar to those facing the actors in the current contract dispute. The Broadway producers were determined to expand a practice of replacing musicians with “canned” music.

With the strike winning support from other theater workers and costing an estimated $2 million a day in revenues, New York City’s Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the media successfully pressured the union leadership to settle. The resulting agreement is expected to cut union jobs by as much as 25 percent while yielding a significant reduction in production costs.