

US: Actors Equity leadership votes not to strike

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Despite its failure to reach a negotiated settlement, by the end of the old contract on Sunday, June 27, the 70-member governing council of the Actor's Equity Association voted June 29 in its New York office not to call a strike. They made this decision even though 6,000 actors voted by a 98 percent margin to authorize a walkout. Negotiations broke down more than an hour before the old contract expired, when representatives of the League of American Theaters and Producers walked out.

The Association issued a statement June 29 stating, "The Equity Council, the governing body of Actors' Equity Association, has determined that the actors will report to the theaters on Wednesday for both performances and will continue to do so until further notice. No further information is available." A spokesman for the producers immediately responded: "We're very happy that Equity has decided that Broadway will continue to perform, but it is imperative that we begin to perform in negotiations as well."

The union has announced on their web site that negotiations are scheduled to resume on Tuesday, July 6. Also appearing on their web site, the president of the union, Patrick Quinn, issued a statement dated July 2 that admits that a "question raised by some members is why we are not now on strike. The decision to strike is a very serious step and while we are completely prepared to do so if it becomes necessary, we feel a strong obligation to you and all other theatrical union members to explore every avenue of negotiation first. This in no way is a form of capitulation."

The leadership of the union is under tremendous pressure not to shut down Broadway precisely because of the potentially powerful impact a walkout would have during the summer tourist season. The chairman of the city's tourist and convention bureau estimates

that the city will have 10 million visitors this summer, many of whom plan on purchasing tickets to see Broadway plays.

Broadway musicians went on strike in New York March of last year for four days, closing down 18 shows at a cost of about \$8 million. A strike by the actors at this time would be much more effective, shutting down 25 to 30 plays and costing the city perhaps as much as \$15 million a day. Only five Broadway shows, and all off-Broadway plays, are not covered by this contract.

Both sides have a press blackout regarding the issues in negotiation. It is well known, however, that the issues in contention involve wages, health care benefits and job safety. Another major issue appears to be the desire of the producers to limit the wages of actors who work shows that are on national tour. The executives want to pay union actors 30 to 40 percent less than normal for the initial runs for road shows in case they do not fare well financially. The actors would, however, receive a raise, depending on whether or not the show is able to make a profit.

This proposal, among a number of others that the producers are making to reduce their costs, is not sitting to well with actors who are already experiencing a high rate of unemployment and who thereby suffer from both a serious lack of income and medical benefits.



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