

New York: Sotheby's workers locked out for more than a week

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27 July 2004

Sotheby's, the well-known auction house located in the fashionable East Side of Manhattan, has locked out 54 union workers who had been working without a new contract.

A company spokesperson claimed that Sotheby's took this action and hired replacements because they were afraid that a strike would seriously disrupt their business. However, a spokesperson for Teamsters Local 814, representing the workers, has complained that the company's action was unnecessary since the union declared its willingness to be as "flexible" as necessary. The lockout took place July 16, a little more than two weeks after the previous three-year contract expired. The union has not carried out a walkout against the company since 1988-89.

According to the union, Sotheby's is demanding a number of givebacks such as a reduction in holiday pay from double to one-and-a-half times regular pay. The company is offering two \$1,000 bonuses in each of the first two years of a four-year contract, plus a 1 percent and 2 percent raise in each of the last two years. A union official has said that, in order to be reasonable, Local 814 has dramatically reduced its demands for employee health benefits.

Many of the workers are life-long admirers of the arts who have been employed at Sotheby's for up to 30 years. They handle extremely expensive art objects, antiques and memorabilia worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

For example, general foreman John Pinkelmeyer, a union member who has worked at Sotheby's for 25 years, explained to a WSWs reporter on the picket line how he packaged and shipped a painting by Picasso worth \$104 million. Company officials made it clear, he said, that they only wanted him for this project. Pinkelmeyer pointed out that workers learn over many

years how to properly handle such objects worth more money than all of them together could possibly earn during their lifetimes. They must learn how to safely package the art, move it and mount it at the client's location.

The union spokesman has said that Sotheby's has flown scab workers in from London and put them up in hotels. He also said that he has heard that the company has already lost millions of dollars as a result of damaged goods.

Sotheby's has been in business since 1744. However, the company has been experiencing financial problems in the last number of years. Management has decided to auction only the priciest items, and as a result, the company is now handling 70 percent fewer objects than it did in 1998. Furthermore, company executives were involved in a price-fixing scandal with another famous auction company, Christie's. Sotheby's former chairman A. Alfred Taubman, the majority shareholder, went to federal prison, and former chief executive Diana Brooks was placed under house arrest.

The company has lost \$312 million in the past four years, and it has put in place a number of cost-cutting measures, such as reducing the non-unionized workforce by about one-third. However, some workers on the picket line noted that the current corporate officers managed to provide themselves with multimillion-dollar bonuses.



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