

New York City's Radio City Music Hall locks out musicians for holiday show

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New York's Radio City Music Hall has locked out its musicians since last Friday after they staged a one-day strike in a dispute over a new contract. Their five-year contract had expired in May.

The musicians, members of a 35-piece orchestra, walked out Wednesday from their rehearsal for the music hall's annual "Christmas Spectacular," and the Rockettes dancers joined them in a show of solidarity.

Barry Watkins, a spokesman for Radio City Entertainment, which produces the show, claimed that the musicians rejected management's offer. However, American Federation of Musicians Local 802 President David Lennon said that, on the contrary, the union accepted the offer but the producers changed their minds at the last minute.

This popular and traditional holiday show has included live music throughout its 73-year history. The show runs for two months and is performed six times a day, seven days a week. Even though ticket prices can be as high as \$325, it draws in an audience of more than a million people.

On Thursday, the producers replaced the union members with digital pre-recorded music. The producers took this step despite the fact that the musicians showed up in their tuxedos prepared to play for the opening performance. Security guards were posted at the front entrance of the theater to physically prevent the orchestra from entering the hall.

On Friday, it was reported in *Newsday* that James Dolan, the president of the media giant Cablevision, which owns Radio City Music Hall as well as Madison Square Garden, has insisted that he will not agree to a new contract until union officials sign a letter stating that they "lied and misled the public, the press, and patrons" about the status of the contract negotiations. He has reportedly further demanded and that this letter

be published in New York City newspapers at the union's expense.

Union president David Lennon called the statement "a bald face lie. This is illegal. It is blackmail." The union has filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board charging Cablevision with extortion. Lennon has said that the union was prepared to agree to a new contract that would include annual wage increases of 3 and 4 percent, but would not sign such a letter.

Cablevision's antics reveal that this contract dispute is clearly not about wages, but rather the drive by producers to replace live performances with canned music. This was precisely the issue at stake when 325 Broadway musicians, members of the same local that has been locked out at the Music hall, struck the League of American Theatres and Producers for four days more than two years ago.

That strike, which took place in March 2003, shut down 18 Broadway musicals and cost producers an estimated \$10 million. The issue in dispute was that of "minimums"—the number of musicians needed for a performance. The producers were seeking to steadily reduce the number of musicians required for each show, eventually leading to the use of pre-recorded music.

It was precisely the threat of replacing a live orchestra with some kind of synthesized music that caused many other theater professionals and patrons to side with the strikers. Nevertheless, the walkout ended with the union leadership agreeing to reduce the minimums 25 percent in return for a guarantee that the new lower number will be in place for 10 years.

Previous to this, the same musicians union went on strike in December of 1999 against the New York City Ballet in a dispute over scheduling and working

conditions. When the musicians walked out, the Nutcracker Suite was performed by dancers to the accompaniment of recorded music used to replace the 70-member orchestra.



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