

Stagehands shut down Broadway over producers' takeaways

Alan Whyte, Bill Van Auken
12 November 2007

In the first strike in their union's 120-year history, over 1,000 stagehands set up picket lines on New York City's Great White Way Saturday, leaving most of the city's Broadway theaters dark.

The strike was provoked by a decision on the part of the Broadway producers to impose unilateral work rule changes that spell cuts in jobs and annual income for the members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Local 1.

The strike brought the curtains down on 26 Broadway shows, including "Spring Awakening," "Rent," "The Color Purple," "Grease," "Wicked," "Hairspray" and "The Phantom of the Opera."

The first show affected by the walkout was an early matinee of the children's seasonal show, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," and, inevitably, the producers association and sections of the media sought to cast the stagehands in the role of the Grinch.

This smear, however, flew in the face of broad popular support for the workers, who install and maintain stages, lighting and props in the Broadway theaters. Actors from many of the shows joined the picket lines. Musicians turned out in front of one struck theater, playing "Solidarity Forever."

John Connolly, executive director, Actors Equity Association, said that the actors union would back the strike because the same issues faced every section of employees. "In every industry, workers are held in contempt; workers are regarded as expendable and that they should be grateful for whatever crumbs they get," he said. "And if your life is a life of part-time temporary work, tough—why weren't you born rich."

The actor Patrick Page, who plays the Grinch in the struck play, came out of the theater Saturday and sang for disappointed children waiting to get into the matinee. At the same time, he expressed his firm

support for the stagehands. "They're the guys who keep me safe when I get hoisted up; they're the guys who put light on me," he said.

And among those with tickets for shows that would not go on, the sentiment was largely in the strikers' favor.

"They say it's a billion-dollar industry, and I don't find that hard to believe," Mary Press, a medical technologist from Connecticut with unusable tickets for "Avenue Q on Broadway," told the *New York Times*. "These are the little guys that are on strike, and I can empathize with the little guys."

Following on the heels of the writers' strike in Hollywood and New York, the stagehands' walkout has underscored the fundamental underlying conflict that pervades the entertainment industry—and society as a whole—between the profit drive of the corporations and the basic rights and needs of those who work in and create film, television and theater.

There is every indication that the management association, the League of American Theatres and Producers, sought a confrontation with the union in order to achieve far-reaching cutbacks in labor costs. The league imposed a per-ticket assessment on theater owners and producers that has produced a \$20 million war fund to weather a long strike aimed at breaking the union.

The management demands include major reductions in staffing, including the elimination of positions, such as flymen, who check the rigging and overall safety in the flyspace, the area above the stage where scenery hangs and is raised and lowered for scene changes. The union has charged that cutting these positions would pose significant dangers, including that of theater fires.

Stagehands have been working without a contract since July 31. In the course of the negotiations, their

union has indicated that it would be amendable to staffing changes, but only to the extent that they were compensated with corresponding increases in salaries and benefits.

The league has claimed that its final offer included a 16.5 percent wage increase over five years, but the union has countered that it would actually result in a 38 percent cut in jobs and wages.

On October 22, the league announced that it was unilaterally implementing the onerous new work rules rejected by the union.

Economic losses from the strike are expected to amount to some \$17 million a day in direct and indirect costs. The shutdown of the theaters has a severe impact on restaurants, retail stores, taxis and others dependent on the theater crowds for revenue.

The last major strike on Broadway took place in 2003, when musicians struck against a demand by the theater owners and producers for the scrapping of rules setting a minimum number of musicians that must be hired for pit orchestras. The producers' aim was to create the conditions in which live music could be eliminated altogether and replaced by "virtual orchestras."

That strike was brought to a halt, with significant takeaways imposed upon the musicians, thanks in large part to the union leadership's bowing to immense political pressure from the city administration of New York's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg. In the IATSE strike, Bloomberg has already attempted to insinuate himself into negotiations.

In advance of the stagehands' walkout, there had been widespread speculation that the president of the IATSE national union, Tom Short, would prevent a shutdown by refusing to authorize a strike. In the 2003 strike, Short had reportedly assured Broadway producers that IATSE members would scab on the musicians, but the New York stagehands refused to cross picket lines.

The union refused to issue any comments on the strike Saturday, and pickets told reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* that they had been instructed by their leadership to say nothing to the media.

One electrician picketing in front of the Marquis Theatre on Broadway, where "The Drowsy Chaperone" was showing, did speak to the WSWS about the issues

in the walkout:

"I am the sole provider for a family of five. The media makes it sound like we are being offered a wage hike. In reality, if we accepted the producers' offer in cutbacks in jobs and wages, my salary would be reduced by 25 percent.

"Like the construction industry, we have no guarantee of steady work. You work if the theaters need you and like the way you produce for them. There are no seniority protections.

"The actors, costumers, and the musicians all support us. Some of the actors came out with picket signs. One of the leading actors in our show picketed with us with his two children. There will be no show tonight.

"The producers made a record billion dollars last year and they still want to cut our wages. But this doesn't mean that the theaters will charge the customers less for the tickets. The companies want to make more of a profit. Indeed, the theaters saved \$20 million from ticket profits in order to prepare for this strike.

"The producers hired a lawyer with expertise in union-busting who had been previously used by the *New York Times* against their unions. With his guidance, they have been preparing to provoke this strike for at least three years.

"We rejected their original offer, and then the producers came back with another offer that was even worse. They wanted us to walk out in October when in most of the theaters they implemented the work rule changes that they were demanding to be part of the new contract. Even then, the union decided not to strike, but to wait in order to have more time to resolve this issue. But it is clear that the producers are not interested in any kind of compromise."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact