

Broadway remains dark another week after strike talks break down

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The strike that has shut the bulk of New York's theaters will continue at least through the Thanksgiving holiday weekend—Broadway's second busiest season of the year—after talks between the stagehands union and the theater owners and producers broke down on Sunday night.

The two sides held two days of talks over the weekend as the strike by International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) Local 1—the first in its 120-year history—entered its second week.

The negotiations ended abruptly after the owners and producers rejected a union counterproposal and continued to insist on sweeping work rule changes that would impose sharp cuts in wages and hours and reduce many stagehands to the status of part-time labor.

"The producers informed Local 1 that what Local 1 had offered was simply not enough," said a statement issued by the union Sunday night. "The producers then walked out."

The owners' intransigence found fresh expression in the wake of the talks after Local 1 agreed to take down its picket line outside the St. James Theatre, where the walkout shut down the holiday musical "Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas" during its opening week. The show, which has a limited holiday run, is in danger of insolvency if it remains closed by the walkout much longer. Moreover, the union negotiated a separate agreement with the producers, who are not members of the League of American Theaters and Producers, which negotiates for management in the current dispute.

While the "Grinch's" executive producer James Sanna immediately announced plans to get the performance up and running, he was vetoed by the St. James's owner, Jujamcyn Theaters, which issued a formal letter, declaring, "'The 'Grinch' will not

reopen until the union signs agreements and ends the strike at all theaters and all the other shows that have been closed by their strikes reopen on Broadway."

Sanna announced that he was going to court to seek an injunction to force the theater owners to relent. "It's not like there's an opportunity for us to put up our show in May," Sanna told a Monday press conference. "We only have seven more weeks in the run."

While the media made much of the "Grinch" theme when Local 1 walked out on November 10, for the most part it has spared the theater owners and producers the charge of having "stolen Christmas," continuing to blame the stagehands for a strike that was forced upon them by a management determined to slash costs and boost profits.

Playing its usual role, the *New York Post*, the right-wing tabloid run by Rupert Murdoch, led the pack in denouncing the union. In a Tuesday editorial titled "Killing Broadway," it dismisses union charges that the strike is the result of demands by "greedy producers," insisting that "the stagehands need to look in a mirror."

The *Post* adopts the same hypocritical pose as in the December 2005 New York City transit strike, blaming the stagehands for the suffering of "waiters, waitresses, busboys, bartenders and retail workers," who the paper declared "are taking a huge hit."

Of course the same paper evinces no sympathy for these sections of the workforce when they are laid off or have their wages cut by their employers, while its columnists regularly vilify immigrant workers, who fill a large share of these jobs.

Needless to say, there was no mention in the *Post* editorial of management's refusal to allow the curtain to go up on the "Grinch." In the pursuit of profit and the destruction of workers' rights, all methods are permitted. It is only workers who refuse to surrender

who are to be condemned.

The refusal of the stagehands to give in to the demands of the owners and producers has apparently been maintained in opposition to pressure from their own national union.

IATSE national president Thomas Short participated in the weekend's negotiating sessions. James Claffey Jr., the president of Local 1, told the *New York Times*, "The international president was more willing to agree to things to end the labor dispute. I need to make sure my people are represented the best way I can do."

Short, who the week before the talks issued a vitriolic letter denouncing the Writers Guild strike, has a long record of subordinating the rights of his own members—not to mention those of other unions—to the demands of management. In 2003, he reportedly instructed Broadway stagehands to cross picket lines during a four-day musicians strike. That dispute, in which the owners and producers sought to rip up work rules setting a minimum for the number of musicians needed for a Broadway show, was a direct precursor of their current offensive against the stagehands.

Meanwhile, the city has estimated that the strike is costing some \$2 million a day in terms of lost revenue.



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