

Lockout of New York City Opera performers begins after mediation breaks down

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Musicians and singers were locked out by the New York City Opera on Monday, as chorus rehearsals were scheduled to begin for the company's abbreviated season. The latest development in the ongoing collapse of what had been New York's second major opera company for more than six decades took place after the breakdown of talks assisted by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service over the past three weeks.

The lockout affects chorus rehearsals for a start, but it places a further question mark over the limited series of performances the City Opera had scheduled for the year, beginning with a weeklong run of Verdi's *La Traviata* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on February 12. The company announced only 16 performances of four operas for the season, a fraction of the scores of performances it has put on annually during most of its existence.

The City Opera has suffered from years of declining ticket sales and especially of donations from wealthy supporters, and its budget fell even farther into the red after the financial collapse that began nearly four years ago. Last June the opera company announced it was leaving its home in New York's Lincoln Center, slashing its annual budget from \$31 million to some \$13 million, and preparing to turn its musicians and singers into freelance employees earning a pittance, even compared to their recent modest salaries of about \$40,000 annually.

The pay had been based on a guaranteed 26 to 29 weeks of work per season. The company proposed instead that performers, members of the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA) and Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians, would work as needed. For the current season, this would leave them with salaries of about \$4,000 to \$5,000.

George Steel, the executive director of the City

Opera, paid a reported \$324,000 a year, issued a statement labeling the musicians as unrealistic and uncooperative. "As we have said countless times, we have to transition to the model that most opera companies use—paying people only for the work that they do," said Steel.

A company management news release declared that "City Opera had no other choice but to lock them out, as the company cannot afford to pay for rehearsals when the unions have pledged to strike the performances" beginning in February. Members of both unions have authorized strike action, but no strike dates have been set. The company said nothing about whether the season would be canceled or whether it would seek to replace the singers and musicians.

The unions had made it clear they were prepared to accept massive cutbacks, and in fact the performers have made numerous concessions in recent years. According to reports in the *New York Times* and *Crain's New York Business*, players' negotiating committee chair Gail Kruvand, a double bassist in the City Opera orchestra, asserted that the unions had offered to play performances for no pay but to be paid for rehearsals, an offer that was rejected.

"We made a good-faith effort to say that, yes, we are willing to sacrifice—as we have in the past—for the sake of ensuring that the grand tradition of the City Opera lives on," Kruvand said. "During the mediation process that ended unsuccessfully, we offered further economic concessions. Steel's intransigence in rejecting our many constructive proposals is the death knell for one of New York's cultural treasures."

This comment, along with a similar one from Alan Gordon, AGMA executive director, calling it "a very sad day for what once was a spectacular cultural icon," points to the broader significance of what looks like the

drawn-out death agony of the City Opera.

The social and economic conditions behind the threats to cultural riches such as the City Opera raise important issues. There has been some media talk in recent months about whether New York City could any longer afford a second major opera company, alongside the Metropolitan Opera. The real question is whether the financial and corporate elite, which dictates the agenda for all major arts and cultural institutions, is interested in having a second opera company in the city, one that concentrates on newer productions, broader audiences and performances at affordable prices.

It is significant that the City Opera employees face a lockout at the same time as the Cooper Tire workers in Ohio and Caterpillar workers in Canada. As has become abundantly clear in recent years, white-collar and professional workers have lost most of the privileges they may have enjoyed in the past, and today increasingly face the same challenges as those of every section of the working class.

Who will save the City Opera and similar institutions? Instead of trying to convince the plutocrats and their representatives that they are making a mistake, what is urgently needed is a political struggle that reaches out to every section of working people and makes the case for publicly funded and subsidized opera and other areas of cultural life.



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