

Philadelphia Theatre Company stagehands' strike in second week

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29 January 2013

Stagehands at the Philadelphia Theatre Company (PTC) are in the second week of a strike against the theater's management and board members. The 27 stagehands are organized in the International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE).

The strike began January 18 and has gained strength over the course of the past week. Last Wednesday, a group of about 100 strikers and their supporters marched from City Hall to the Suzanne Roberts Theater to publicize the stagehands' demands.

According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, strikers are demanding that PTC management establish a \$4,000-per-year "health and welfare" fund for each employee and a contractual codification of the working conditions that existed before the stagehands were organized. They also initially demanded a raise to bring their wages to \$29 an hour, up from the present \$16-19 an hour, although this demand has apparently been dropped.

Workers at the theater make between \$10,000 and \$40,000 a year, with most of them on the lower end of the spectrum, making \$10,000-20,000 annually. In negotiations, IATSE has already signaled its willingness to accept a token raise of \$1.50 per hour for each worker, spread over the next three years (25 cents in the first year, 50 in the second, and 75 in the third), so long as the stagehands' other demands are met.

Michael Barnes, a business agent for the union, has stated that the most important issue is whether the PTC agrees to continued collective bargaining and agrees not to employ workers outside of the union—i.e., that IATSE continues to collect union dues from the stagehands.

Barnes commented that management will "not agree to back off its demand to have the unrestricted right to

hire as many non-union workers as they decide," in order "to perform the work covered in the union's jurisdiction and previously performed by the workers of the PTC who chose to be represented by the union." He added that negotiations have reached an impasse because the company refuses to answer its proposals and seems intent on engaging in punitive actions against its workers. The PTC has tried unsuccessfully to hire strike-breaking replacement workers over the past week.

For its part, the company is portraying the union as stubbornly refusing its offer to make concessions on virtually every front. Representing employers at the theater, artistic director Sara Garonzik commented: "To our knowledge, the union has made no effort to do further negotiations. They are unwilling. We are waiting to hear from them." PTC claims that it is willing to make significant concessions on wages, health benefits, transportation provisions, and other matters.

IATSE is preparing to reduce the stagehands' demands to token gestures in exchange for management's recognition of its right to represent the workers in its first collective bargaining agreement at PTC. An examination of IATSE's recent record in other labor disputes is instructive in this regard.

Just last month, broadcast technicians working at PAC 12, a college basketball television network on the West Coast, went on strike to establish standard measures of pay and benefits. The technicians were represented by a chapter of IATSE, which charged the network with routinely using "non-union" labor and argued that workers outside of the union generally operated with lower wages and without the protections afforded by union membership. However, the union was forced to admit that it agreed to a number of

concessions to management so that it could establish the union within the company.

In 2007, when 350 Broadway stagehands went on strike, Local 1 of IATSE in New York City yielded to pressure from the mainstream press and its own parent union, resulting in the termination of workplace regulations governing overtime policies and lowering the number of workers considered necessary for crucial mechanical tasks. Ultimately, the union had a hand in transforming formerly full-time positions into part-time jobs that do not provide a reliable and livable income.



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