

New York's Metropolitan Opera threatens August 1 lockout

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26 July 2014

A major confrontation looms in the ongoing struggle against contract concessions by musicians and other cultural employees, as New York's Metropolitan Opera announces plans for a lockout of its employees beginning August 1.

Met general manager Peter Gelb sent out letters this week warning that "if we are not able to reach agreements by July 31 that would enable the Met to operate on an economically sound basis, please plan for the likelihood of a work stoppage beginning August 1." He spelled out his reference to a work stoppage in an interview with the *New York Times* in which he stated, "If we haven't reached agreements, the Met really has no option in my opinion but to impose a lockout."

Management is demanding givebacks of 16 percent in wages and benefits from workers whose contracts are expiring, involving 15 out of the 16 unions at the company. These include about 100 musicians of the Met Orchestra, around 80 chorus members, as well as stagehands, costumers and makeup artists, production technicians, janitors and others.

Gelb's letter also warned that workers would lose their health insurance in the event of a lockout, and that continuing their coverage under federal law would cost \$1,255 monthly for individuals and \$2,793 for families.

Management's propaganda has focused on high salaries for musicians and choristers. Gelb has pointed to the fact that he took a 10 percent pay cut last year, but he omits to mention big salary increases in the years immediately preceding. In 2012 the Met General Manager earned \$1.8 million.

Nor does the company mention that it is demanding the same concessions from many workers whose pay is barely adequate to meet New York City's high cost of living. One hundred fifty members of Local 32B of the Service Employees, including janitors, ushers and

office workers, demonstrated July 24 against the concession demands.

Gelb points to the fact that Met attendance has dropped in recent years, and that labor costs make up two-thirds of the company's \$317 million in expenditures. Of course, since it is the highly skilled workers that make the Met productions possible, there is absolutely nothing surprising or unwarranted about this figure.

The unions have focused on criticism of Gelb's expensive new productions in recent years. Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians issued a statement explaining it was "dismayed that Peter Gelb has pursued a cynical strategy calculated to result in a lockout of his artists and craftspeople and imperil the upcoming Met Opera season ... If the Met in fact is facing financial difficulties it is due to Peter Gelb's lavish overspending on productions that have been poorly received by critics and audiences."

Alan Gordon of the American Guild of Musical Artists is quoted in the *Times* as saying that Gelb "has no intention of actually reaching an agreement unless it's his agreement. Once he locks out employees, his relationship with the performers at the Met is over. They will never respect him again."

The last lockout at the Met took place 34 years ago and lasted 11 weeks. This struggle took place on the eve of the wave of unionbusting that began with the PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981, and the devastation of working class living standards that has continued uninterrupted for the past three decades.

For a period of time orchestra musicians and professionals were able to avoid the same kind of draconian assaults on their living standards, but the past several years, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, has seen a major shift.

This was ushered in especially by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra strike of 2010-11, followed by the Philadelphia Orchestra's filing for bankruptcy to extract givebacks from its musicians. The New York City Opera shut down, and the San Diego Opera threatened to do likewise. The long and bitter lockout at the Minnesota Orchestra ended about six months ago, with concessions less than those originally demanded, but roughly on the same order as those now proposed by the Met in New York.

The giveback demands raise the fundamental issue of who will pay to maintain and develop humanity's cultural riches. As far as the plutocracy that holds sway is concerned, in this sphere as everywhere else, it is working people who must shoulder the burden. The financial crisis at the Met—even though it may have been exacerbated by decisions by Gelb to try to attract new audiences by spending on questionable theatrically driven productions—is most of all the product of a broader cultural decline, along with the virtual elimination of arts education, and the elimination of what little was available in public subsidies in the past.

The ruling elite shapes all spheres of social and cultural life in its own selfish and grasping image. It does not really care about expanding the audience, unless that means perhaps attracting some more of the upper middle class layers who have squeezed into Manhattan. The very idea of government subsidy, based as it would have to be on higher taxes on the wealthy, is enough to provoke consternation and outrage among the multimillionaires and billionaires who populate the Board of Directors of the Met Opera and similar elite institutions.

Those who join the Met Opera board are expected to donate huge amounts. With few exceptions they are all enormously wealthy. A recent survey reported that the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Opera had the most members of the Forbes 400 list of richest Americans—or their wives—of any arts institutions.

The current Met board includes a number of wives, widows and ex-wives. Its chairwoman is Ann Ziff, the widow of a publishing executive who left a fortune of \$15.5 billion. Mrs. Ziff's Vice-Chairman is Mercedes Bass, the ex-wife of Sid Bass, the oil tycoon who is worth “only” about \$3 billion. Mrs. Bass gave the Met a gift of \$25 million a few years ago, and she was soon topped by Mrs. Ziff's donation of \$30 million.

Even if these contributions simply reflected the generosity of opera lovers, the obvious question is why the Met should place its future in the hands of a handful of super-rich dilettantes. In fact, however, as the *New York Times* explained a few years ago, “the rewards of service are many: social status, the personal satisfaction of doing good, the chance to rub shoulders with Rockefellers and Lauders, and a say in setting the intellectual course of the nation, if not the world, through a leading museum or performing arts institution.”

The author also recommends:

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