

English National Opera chorus to strike

Margot Miller
15 March 2016

The world renowned choir at the English National Opera (ENO) is to take industrial action, including a strike, between March 14 and 19.

On March 18, the chorus will refuse to sing in the first act of Philip Glass's *Akhnaten* to protest job losses and pay cuts. Their silence for a quarter of the production will represent the 25 percent pay cut ENO management intends to impose.

The action was announced on the steps of the headquarters of ACE, the Arts Council England, where the choir delighted passersby with a rendition of "Hail, Poetry" from the *Pirates of Penzance*. In 2015, ACE slashed its funding grant to ENO by 29 percent, from £17.2 million to £12.4 million. This was the result of government funding cuts to the Arts Council over the previous four years of 36 percent.

Since then ENO has been put into "special measures" by ACE and told to improve its "business model" and governance or face more cuts. ENO has been removed from ACE's National Portfolio of art organizations it decides to subsidise, which threatens its continued survival.

According to ACE chief executive Darren Henley, like all opera companies ENO has "to adapt or die."

The proposed cuts to the 44-strong chorus, which voted by 42 to take industrial action (one member being on maternity leave and the other off sick), would reduce annual pay from £32,900 to £25,000, making it impossible to live and work in London. The real reduction in pay could be even more, up to 39 percent, with the threatened removal of payment for Sunday working and overtime pay.

On top of pay cuts, four jobs are threatened, as well as the imposition of a nine-month contract.

The ENO choir has received support from the world of the theatre and the public. In a letter published in the *Guardian*, the attacks on ENO were condemned by, among others, composer Sir James MacMillan and American conductor Marin Alsop. ENO was described as "this beloved company that plays such a crucial role in

the country's creative life."

A new sell-out programme of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* was staged in March starring Bryn Terfel and Emma Thompson. In April, Andrew Lloyd Webber's production of *Sunset Boulevard* will begin starring Glenn Close.

The ENO is the only one of two opera companies in a capital with a resident population of 8.6 million and 17.4 million annual visitors. Founded by theatre producer and manager Lilian Baylis, with a mission to stage opera for the masses, its origins go back to the late 19th century. It is unique in that the company always sings in English, unlike the Royal Opera House, which puts on productions in the language in which they were written.

Like all opera houses the ENO survives on government grants via ACE and box office takings. In response to the cuts, ENO has already truncated its new season, with fewer productions. Last year 50 percent of all ticket prices were reduced to encourage bigger audiences to enjoy such favourites as *The Barber of Seville*, *The Mikado*, *The Magic Flute* and *Madam Butterfly*. While the Royal Opera House has been able in the recent years of austerity to maintain its wealthier audience base, the ENO tends historically to attract the less well-off and has seen a decline in attendance.

Financial pressures on ENO have resulted in management infighting. John Berry, the artistic director of 10 years, resigned after being accused by Chairman Martin Rose of threatening the financial viability of the company with lavish productions that failed to fill the Coliseum (the ENO's home). As a result, ENO currently does not have an artistic director. In January of last year Rose and the executive director, Henriette Gotz, both quit.

While lacking an artistic director, the ENO does have a new CEO. High-flying management consultant Cressida Pollock, previously of the US-based management consultancy firm McKinsey, was appointed as CEO last March. Lacking a background in opera, she raised eyebrows by referring to ENO as a brand and admitted she wasn't a fan of opera.

While acknowledging that “we are a lean operation” as a result of government cuts, Pollock warned, “We have some difficult decisions to make over the coming weeks as we seek to find ways to remodel our business so that we can weather a £5 million cut from our core Arts Council grant.”

Even though ACE is at pains to say that it is ENO’s decision regarding managing its budget, there is a conflict between ACE and the ENO as to whether the opera company needs a full-time chorus and orchestra.

Actor Martin Sinclair, president of the theatre and actors’ trade union Equity, said the cuts would “damage the artistic integrity of the choir.” Assistant General Secretary Stephen Spence called the proposed attacks on the choir “cultural vandalism.”

Equity has made clear that they will work within the framework of the austerity measures imposed by the Tory government. They will not oppose the cuts, but seek to work with management to impose them. Equity official Hilary Hadley confirmed this, saying, “Equity understands the need to make savings and is committed to working with the ENO to make substantial savings.”

During the Labour leadership contest, Jeremy Corbyn pledged to invest in the arts and culture, decrying the £82 million cuts imposed over the last five years by the Conservative/Liberal coalition and current Tory government. But his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, has insisted, “Labour is committed to eliminating the deficit and creating an economy in which we live within our means.”

The attacks on the ENO are only one expression of the massive cuts imposed in arts and culture funding generally. As endless amounts of money are squandered to keep the parasitic banks afloat and poured into military expenditure, access to culture is increasingly becoming the preserve of the wealthy elite. The only way to realise the dreams of ENO founder Lilian Baylis of bringing art to the masses is to put an end to the profit system.



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