

British Columbia: IATSE suppresses opposition to union malfeasance

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Amid growing outrage among the members of Vancouver-based International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) Local 891 over a misuse of union funds scandal, the union has moved to blatantly silence opposition voices. In an email blast to all members late last month under the signature of Local 891 President Keith Woods, IATSE threatened workers with criminal charges if details of a spending scandal were further publicized.

At issue is the racking up of tens of thousands of dollars in personal expenses dating from 2008 to 2017 on a union credit card by Senior IATSE Steward Kelly Moon. Moon has been firmly ensconced in the IATSE bureaucracy for many years. She has been elected three times to the union's Executive Board, participated in contract bargaining committees, worked on committees with the British Columbia Federation of Labour, and served as an IATSE delegate to the Canadian Labour Congress.

Woods' threat to the membership came just prior to the opening of the local union's election window for executive officials, including the Senior Shop Steward position. Moon has once again stood for reelection.

Details of Moon's abuse of the union credit card were revealed on January 24, 2019, in a single paragraph in the union local's weekly e-newsletter during the deepest part of the winter downtime period for the industry. The communication contained a hyperlink to an Audit Committee report of the credit card abuses. Within a week, the report was taken down by the union.

However, over subsequent months, the accountant's report began to circulate amongst the more than 9,000 local members, prompting the union's late September attempt to suppress the growing rank-and-file demands for a full airing of the scandal and proper accountability

to the membership. Woods' communication stated, "Under the Personal Information Protection Act, all details about non-business credit card usage of the Senior Steward is personal information, and is not to be disclosed beyond the writers of the report and the Executive Board. As such, the report that was published earlier will not be re-released. Ongoing release of information from the report may result in liability under the BC Personal Information Protection Act, and charges can be laid."

The Audit report begins with the statement, "In 2008, the Senior Steward incurred \$43,464.09 in personal expenses. This included, among other things, extensive charges at casinos, cash advances, clothing and interest." There followed an itemized list of these expenses. The audit report listed another \$3,730.41 in expenses during the first 47 days of 2009 deemed to be personal, including large cash advances. On February 16, 2009, the union Executive Board, with Moon in attendance, passed a revised credit card policy that clearly prohibited use of the union credit card for personal expenses, including cash advances. However, Moon continued to use her card for these prohibited activities.

The 2009 report concludes with the notation that Moon ultimately repaid her 2008 and 2009 personal charges either through direct bank payment or payroll deduction. Union policy states that payroll deductions are used to recoup funds when reimbursement from the cardholder is not immediately forthcoming. The report goes on to list unceasing violations of the union's credit card policy in the years 2010 through 2017, including expenditures in Paris, New York, Las Vegas and various local and international casinos and a racetrack. Payroll deductions and direct bank payments retired these debts.

Workers have been outraged, but perhaps not entirely surprised, by the sense of entitlement exhibited by union officials in IATSE. Perks, slack time-keeping, lavish expense accounts and official junkets to international resorts are the stock-in-trade of union officialdom everywhere. One need only look at the vast corruption scandal still unfolding in the American United Auto Workers (UAW) union to see how far this has led.

The particular case of Kelly Moon's petty and not-so-petty abuse of her union privileges is not simply an example of an entitled union official. Rather, it reflects the fact that the privileged union bureaucrats have antagonistic interests to the workers they claim to represent. During the entire decade of discovered "irregularities," Moon continued her climb up the union bureaucracy career ladder.

To this day, there is no record of her having been disciplined by the IATSE Executive. No announcement has been made by the union to restrict compromised officials from participation in the next round of contract negotiations. As illustrated by Local 891 President Woods' recent threat to the membership to keep quiet or face possible criminal charges, the Executive Board views worker opposition to union malfeasance as the only problem at hand.

IATSE functions not as an organization uniting workers against the employers, but as a labour contractor—a hiring hall—for the multi-billion dollar film and television industry. Its chief aim is to attract projects based on providing the lowest wages and most grueling conditions for its highly skilled workforce. This is summed up by Moon's own job description, which concludes, "The Senior Steward works toward establishing and maintaining a friendly and co-operative dialogue with Industry Employers."

This "friendly" dialogue is reflected in the union's steady erosion of workers' contractual protections. Last year, the union negatively altered pay scales before the end of the current contract. Forced overtime continues to be a major issue. Twelve-hour work days are contractually enforced, but workers, should they wish to remain in the hiring hall's good books, often find themselves toiling 70 or even 80 hours per week. Health and safety issues ensue. Due to the seasonal basis of the industry, workers also experience months of downtime where no work is available.

The use of temporary labour continues to grow. In the large-set construction section, workers may gain employment for only a few days or weeks at any given time. They receive as little as \$23 per hour in one of the country's most expensive cities, where studies have shown that a living wage for a full-time worker is \$20 per hour. It is not an uncommon sight to see workers sleeping in their cars outside studio grounds.

The "path" to more secure work is constantly changed depending on the demands of the industry. Presently, a temp needs 90 days of "verifiable work" in any one department to at least gain, for a while, "full membership" in the union. Due to short-term hiring practices, temps seldom qualify for this.

The precarious nature of employment in the industry is reflected in the union's own contradictory employment estimates. Depending on where one looks, IATSE's local membership totals are pegged at 8,000, 9,000 and even up to 14,000 workers.

Vancouver has recently become one of the leading centers for North American entertainment productions and has received generous tax breaks from the government. The industry in British Columbia had budgetary expenditures of \$3.2 billion in the 2018-19 fiscal year. A new state-of-the-art mega studio measuring over 600,000 square feet will be constructed in Vancouver next year. Studio profits on any particular production can be staggering, even as conditions for workers continue to deteriorate.



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