

Metropolitan Opera in New York ends season, laying off musicians and other staff

Fred Mazelis
21 March 2020

The Metropolitan Opera in New York City announced the end of its entire season on Thursday, along with the layoffs of hundreds of musicians, choristers, stagehands and others. The opera season had originally been scheduled to conclude on May 9. Last week, the company had announced the cancellation of performances through the end of March, before the scope of the coronavirus pandemic forced more drastic measures everywhere.

The closing of the Met and other cultural institutions will throw thousands onto the unemployment lines, where they will join tens of millions of others in an unprecedented surge of jobless claims. Official unemployment totals of 10 percent nationwide within several weeks are predicted, a jump without historical precedent, even in the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

All cultural institutions have closed down, actions made mandatory by the state's order banning large gatherings. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York's premier tourist attraction, has closed down until mid-summer at the earliest, and officials predicted losses of up to \$100 million. The New York Philharmonic, located next to the opera house in Lincoln Center, has canceled all performances, and, according to a report in the *New York Times*, "will be making a significant announcement at the beginning of next week regarding the status of the rest of our season."

Thousands of actors, musicians, stagehands, ushers and others have already been laid off at Broadway theaters. As the WSWS has noted, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) reported March 17 that 120,000 of its members had lost jobs in film and television productions as well as at live events, conventions and other "people-facing

businesses." On Thursday, via a two-minute video, Cirque du Soleil, the largest contemporary circus producer in the world, abruptly laid off 95 percent of its workforce, more than 4,400 people.

The Metropolitan Opera, the largest performing arts institution in the US, with an annual budget of approximately \$310 million, is forecasting losses of up to \$60 million. "As devastating as it is to have to close the Met, this was the rare instance where the show simply couldn't go on," said Met general manager Peter Gelb. "We send our thanks to our loyal audiences and we're doing our best to support our employees during this extraordinarily difficult time. We look forward to being reunited in the fall with a new season." In the meantime, the Met is offering free streaming nightly of past live HD performances of complete operas.

The Met announced, after consultation with both the American Guild of Musical Artists, bargaining agent for chorus members and others, and Local 802 of the Associated Musicians of Greater New York (orchestra members, librarians and other musical staff), that employees would be paid through the end of March and would retain their health benefits. "We're doing the best we can under a horrendously difficult situation," said Gelb. Non-full-time performers, however, including dancers, soloists and choristers, are paid only on a per-performance basis, so they will have no income or benefits for the duration of the crisis.

Gelb announced he would forgo his own salary until operations resume, a small sacrifice for an executive paid \$1.45 million annually. "We are not laying people off," said Gelb, making the semantic point that it was a question of the suspension of operations. The layoffs follow the invoking of contractual "force majeure" clauses, which give corporations and non-profit

institutions the legal right to suspend pay because of circumstances beyond their control, such as natural disasters and, in this case, the coronavirus pandemic.

For the workers, however, the end results are the same, whatever the legal name used to justify them. As far as health benefits are concerned, the company had little choice in the matter. Denying workers those benefits in the midst of the greatest public health crisis in more than a century would have immediately sparked wide outrage and been a public relations disaster for the Met.

The closing and layoffs have once again exposed the class gulf between the employees who create the opera performances and the highly paid executives, not to mention the multimillionaire and billionaire board members of the Met. Gelb announced that these wealthy backers, at whose pleasure he serves, had made initial pledges of \$11 million toward the company's mounting deficit, a drop in the bucket for them.

The current situation also highlights the ongoing crisis of cultural institutions such as the Met, which increasingly rely on the largesse of ultra-wealthy patrons. The opera company has faced declining audiences in recent years, a product in part of broader trends, including the lack of arts and music education. In 2014 Gelb demanded and received, with the agreement of the Met unions, significant concessions from employees.

The closing of the Met and other cultural institutions in the current health crisis is of course not only warranted, but undoubtedly overdue. This does not mean that the staff should suffer in the form of lost pay or benefits. Just as in the rest of economic and cultural life, emergency action to contain the spread of the coronavirus must be combined with full compensation for those who lose their jobs through no fault of their own.

In the case of the giant cultural institutions, the claim that there is no money for such compensation is clearly belied by the role of patrons for whom the Met's predicted \$60 million shortfall is relatively small change.

The crisis affects not only the most prominent institutions, however, but smaller and mid-size classical music companies, art museums and other institutions that have little or nothing to fall back on. Workers at these institutions should also not be made to pay the

price for the crisis. The resources needed for culture exist, but the coronavirus pandemic raises in the starker manner the need for the socialist transformation of economic life. What is posed immediately is the requisitioning of the vast fortunes of the super-rich to ensure that no groups of workers, whether in basic industry, the service sector or in the sphere of cultural life, are unable to support themselves and their families at this time.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact