

Met Opera locks out stagehands while New York Philharmonic musicians take major pay cuts

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Two of the best known musical organizations in the US and worldwide have stepped up their efforts to make the musicians and staff pay for the unprecedented crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Metropolitan Opera in New York announced a lockout of the opera's stagehands, members of Local One of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, as of midnight on Monday. The opera has been demanding pay cuts of 30 percent, only half of which would be restored even after the company returns to pre-coronavirus revenue levels. The pandemic forced the Met to close its doors last March.

The opera company, under general manager Peter Gelb, is taking the unprecedented step of threatening to bring in outside construction shops for five new productions in the 2021-2022 season, assuming the pandemic is brought under control by the fall of next year. The 2021-2022 season includes, unusually for the Met, three contemporary operas— *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, *Eurydice* and *Hamlet* —in addition to new productions of *Rigoletto* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

About 1,000 Met employees, including stagehands, musicians and members of the chorus, have been furloughed without pay since last spring. In the case of the world-famous Met Orchestra, it is the only top-level ensemble that has received no pay during the shutdown. Gelb is now offering the stagehands, whose contract expired last July 31, during the pandemic, pay of up to \$1,500 a week, but only if they agree to a five-year contract that cuts their pay by 30 percent and still leaves it 15 percent below current levels even after (if) the Met box office completely recovers.

“It takes months to build sets,” said Gelb, according to a report by WABC-TV News. “With a lockout, it enables us to consider the possibilities of other options. There are

other construction shops in this country and around the world that are not union.”

The impact of the lockout will begin to be felt within a month. Construction of new sets will be stepped up in the spring and summer, in preparation for rehearsals next August.

IATSE Local One had itself offered a pay cut, but Gelb demanded more. Local One President James J. Claffey, Jr. said, “We’re willing to help during a pandemic period to try to assist, as we’re assisting other employers, but the demand for an indefinite period of time and major demands in perpetuity of not even having wages and conditions restored is unacceptable. We have 350 crew members, and there’s not a single person that’s willing to bargain along the lines that the Met’s proposed.” Claffey said Gelb was “using the pandemic as leverage to try to achieve some concessions that they would not otherwise achieve in normal settings.”

The Met is also seeking to reopen contracts with other unions, including Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians, and the American Guild of Musical Artists, representing the chorus, seeking similar massive cuts.

So far, the AFM officials are rejecting these proposals. Local 802 President Adam Krauthamer echoed IATSE, accusing the Met of “taking advantage of the COVID pandemic to harm and demean these highly-skilled and valuable workers while weakening the cultural treasure that is the Met. The path forward to the Met’s revival should not be at the expense of the very workers who quite literally make the organization function behind the scenes.”

Right next to the Met in New York’s Lincoln Center, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra unveiled, on the same day that the Opera announced its lockout, a new concessions contract with its musicians. The Philharmonic

players, in a deal that will undoubtedly be used as a precedent to drive down salaries at other well-known orchestras around the country, have agreed, as part of a four-year contract, to extend the 25 percent cut in pay that began last May. The new agreement means these cuts will continue until August 2023, more than two-and-a-half years from now. They will then gradually increase in two steps until September 2024, but will still be less at the end of the contract than present base salary.

The Philharmonic announcement was accompanied by the usual crocodile tears on the part of management. The orchestra's president, Deborah Borda, said, as reported on the *Slipped Disc* website, "COVID-19 has reshaped the entire ecology of society and the performing arts are no exception. These were challenging negotiations but, in the end, musicians, management, and Board came together to reach an agreement that will lead to recovery...The participation, the dedication, of the Philharmonic musicians in creatively and pragmatically helping to shape this agreement is something I will never forget. They have my admiration and deepest thanks."

The head of the players' negotiating committee, trombonist Colin Williams, added, in the press release announcing the agreement, "In recognition of the challenges of this time, we have done our part to help preserve the institution by forgoing more than \$20 million of our wages."

The issues at both the Met and the Philharmonic could not be clearer. There is no question that the pandemic, acting as a trigger event, has "reshaped" society, as Ms. Borda says. While it has revealed the completely backward and outmoded capitalist social relations of production and brought tens of millions to the brink of poverty and homelessness, its impact has been no less profound in the non-profit sector of the economy, including the cultural arena.

The Philharmonic expects to lose \$21 million from ticket revenues for the canceled 2020-21 season, following a loss of \$10 million when the 2019-2020 season was abruptly stopped last March. At the Met, a much larger institution, losses are projected at \$154 million. But the only answer of the wealthy boards of directors of these organizations, made up of multimillionaires and prominent members of billionaire families, is to make the musicians and other staff pay.

Even before the pandemic, orchestra musicians have faced repeated demands for concessions, leading to bitter strikes in Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia and elsewhere over the past decade. The pandemic is unquestionably

being used to deepen these earlier attacks. Musicians in San Francisco have already had their pay cut. It is not fundamentally a matter of personal greed of the wealthy directors of these institutions, but rather a symptom of a much broader crisis of the system, expressed in cuts in public services and the cultural sphere, and the crisis and decline of culture itself.

At the Met, Peter Gelb, who is paid about \$1.5 million annually, has made much of the fact that he is forgoing his own salary, and he has said that compensation for fulltime Met stagehands was \$260,000 last year. This ignores the fact that nearly half of those costs go for health care and other benefits, but it also ignores the fact that the directors and leading patrons of the Met have seen their stock portfolios skyrocket in value, even while the stagehands and musicians have received no pay at all for the past seven months. Some of these board members could, on the basis of the rise in their stock portfolios alone, plug the Met's deficit.

For the musicians and other employees at both the Met and the Philharmonic, there can be no avoiding the political implications of the present crisis. There will be no return to the status quo, even after the pandemic. The choice is not between complete disaster and some "reasonable" and temporary sacrifice. The only answer to the challenges posed by the pandemic is a political struggle against the system itself.

The present morally bankrupt and corrupt system of governance in the performing arts, and its growing fiscal crisis, is a reflection of the dead end of the system as a whole. Just as millions of other workers are facing the need to fight for full income compensation combined with a coordinated and scientifically led struggle to end the COVID-19 crisis, so the same issues are facing the musicians, stagehands and choristers.



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