

Met Opera musicians in New York City accept deal for partial paychecks

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The musicians of the Metropolitan Opera orchestra in New York City agreed last week to a deal that will provide partial paychecks for the first time in almost a year, in exchange for their return to the bargaining table, where they face further pressure to accept drastic and permanent concessions.

The Met, led by managing director Peter Gelb, has been demanding 30 percent pay cuts. Citing the pandemic, Gelb has proposed, adding insult to injury, that only half of the pay cuts would be restored, and then only when ticket revenue and donations return to their pre-pandemic level.

In exchange for returning to discussions on these sweeping cuts, the Met had for the last few months dangled before the orchestra musicians the offer of weekly paychecks of up to \$1,543. This is less than half of their previous pay, but for the approximately 100 members of the world-famous orchestra it would be their first compensation in nearly a year. The Met closed its doors last March 21, and furloughed its musicians and other staff a few weeks later.

The Met orchestra was the last major musical ensemble in the US that had yet to come to some sort of agreement on pay during the pandemic. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra, right next to the Met in the Lincoln Center performing arts complex, agreed some months ago to a cut in pay of 25 percent, through August 2023, nearly two and a half years from now. The Boston Symphony, as well as orchestras in San Francisco and elsewhere, had already agreed to similar concessions. The American Guild of Musical Artists, representing chorus members and other staff at the Met, agreed five weeks ago to the deal that the musicians have now reluctantly accepted.

Musicians at the New York City Ballet, also at Lincoln Center, have not been paid since last June. And the 300 stagehands at the Met, members of Local One of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, have been locked out by the Met since early December after refusing to accept 30 percent pay cuts and other concessions.

The year without pay has brought huge struggles for the Met musicians. According to a report in the *New York Times*, 40 percent of them have moved out of New York, while 10 out of 97, or more than 10 percent, have opted to retire. In a “normal” year, that number would have been two or three players.

These are the conditions that led world-renowned conductor Riccardo Muti, who has often conducted in New York and is the former principal conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, to issue a statement two months ago that said, in part, “The artistic world is

in disbelief that the very existence of a great Orchestra like the Met’s could be in danger and even at the risk of disappearing.”

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the current music director of the Met, sent a letter to the Met management on March 18 stating that the situation facing the orchestra’s musicians was “increasingly unacceptable.”

The carefully but strongly worded letter declared, as reported in the *Times*, that, “as the public face of the Met on a musical level, I am finding it increasingly hard to justify what has happened.”

“We risk losing talent permanently,” said Nézet-Séguin, who succeeded James Levine, whose death was announced just last week. “The orchestra and chorus are our crown jewels, and they must be protected. Their talent *is* the Met. The artists of the Met *are* the institution...Protecting the long-term future of the Met is inextricably linked with retaining these musicians, and with respecting their livelihoods, their income and their well-being.”

The current showdown with the musicians and other staff is part of a drive on the part of the Met and its billionaire and multimillionaire trustees to permanently claw back pay and conditions that were achieved through years of hard work and struggle. Gelb has made no secret of his aims. He wrote to the musicians directly about a week ago, stating, “Even before the pandemic, the economics of the Met were extremely challenging and in need of a reset.” There is no mystery on the meaning of “reset” in this context. It is not the wealthy one-tenth of one percent who will pay, but the artists, who, in Nézet-Séguin’s pointed phrase, *are* the Met.

The *World Socialist Web Site* discussed some of these issues with a musician for one of the resident ensembles at Lincoln Center, who has played there for 40 years.

“Of course, the members in the various orchestras are not all in precisely the same position,” he said, referring to the impact of the pandemic. “Those who have somewhat established themselves professionally are not the same as those who have just arrived, or have only a few years with the orchestra.”

“The particular scope of the Met’s crisis,” the musician went on, “is connected to the immense demands that are made by a company of that size. There are different kinds of moving parts...It is also the case that many years ago singers like Kirsten Flagstad, Jussi Björling and others could accomplish an enormous amount without the kinds of expensive sets and productions that we see today. Sometimes this has more to do with marketing the Met as the biggest and best, the preeminent opera house, than it has to do

with the experience of opera itself.

“The demands for permanent and drastic cuts make me sad,” he added. “This doesn’t bode well for the standards at the Met or elsewhere. The same thing goes for the scenic crews, the stagehands and other staff. There will be difficulty in attracting and keeping the talent that is needed...”

“It must also be understood that these problems are not confined to the Met, or to Lincoln Center. It is all of Broadway, the Radio City Music Hall, wherever live music is performed. The pandemic has brought all of this to a head, but the problems are very deep.”

Another New Yorker, whose family members have worked at the Met for many years, told the WWS, “The attacks at the Met are part of the degradation of culture within the capitalist system. Classical music and the arts generally are almost completely dependent on private donors. The price of tickets at the Met have continued to rise, although there have been efforts to make some seats available for students and more affordable seats for others.

“The European governments, particularly in continental Europe, have historically supported the arts to a far higher degree than in the US. This is the product of a long history of social struggles and cultural awareness, including specifically the period of social reforms that emerged after the Second World War. After May-June 1968 in France, the living standards of the working class rose. Additional support was also granted for culture.

“For the trustees of the Met, the opera company is almost an extension of their Wall Street lives. Mercedes Bass (vice-chair of the board) has homes in New York, Fort Worth and Aspen, Colorado. She is related to the widow of the former Shah of Iran. Her fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars comes largely from her divorce settlement with her Texas oilman husband. Ann Ziff’s (chairman of the board) money comes from publishing, and the Wall Street hedge funds and other oligarchs are also well represented on the Met’s board.

“Some of the new Met productions are not so much driven by artistic considerations, as by conspicuous consumption of the most venal sort. The elite has to show that its opera house is the wealthiest, that it can spend many millions of dollars on productions like the recent fiasco with Wagner’s Ring Cycle at the Met, where the set was confusing, disorienting and malfunctioning to boot. The attitude of the trustees is that this is their own money and they can spend it as they see fit. This is where the system of private philanthropy in the arts leads. This overspending, along with many other factors, then leads to demands that the musicians and stagehands pay for the crisis.

“As part of Gelb’s strategy with the lockout of the stagehands, the Met is outsourcing the building of sets for three of next fall’s new productions to companies in Wales and in California. Do you know how expensive it will be to ship those sets back to New York? Even with lower construction costs, they are possibly spending more than if these were constructed here. Just like any giant corporation, they are paying in order to defeat their workers. The unions at the Met are among the very few remaining craft unions whose agreements still provide pensions and other benefits, which have virtually disappeared elsewhere in the economy. The aim of the Met is to eliminate all of this.”

It is certainly symbolic, and also poignant, that the same week

that saw the announcement of the death of James Levine also saw the musicians of the orchestra he built threatened by concessions that endanger its future.

Just as the pandemic represented a trigger event that revealed the accumulated crisis and rot at the heart of world capitalism, on a smaller but still significant scale it represented a trigger event that showed the incompatibility of the cultural patrimony of humanity with the capitalist system of inequality, dictatorship and war.

The days when classical music or other performing arts could be viewed as in some way sheltered from the class struggle raging outside the concert hall have well and truly disappeared. Just as the yawning gulf between the masses of working people and the fortunes of Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and the rest of the billionaires has grown astronomically in the pandemic year, so the stock portfolios of the Met trustees and their circles have skyrocketed even as they demand cutbacks from those who are the *real* Met.

Just as there can be no return to “normalcy” after the pandemic, so there will be no return to the status quo ante at the Met and elsewhere in the music world. It must also be said that, although the artistic priorities and decisions of the Met management are often questionable, the financial problems of the company raise other decisive questions. These include the lack of music education in the public schools and the absence of public subsidies for opera and classical music, to expand the audience for these and other performing arts.

The defense of music requires a political struggle against the profit system. The resources for both impressive theatrical productions and the compensation deserved by the artists that produce the music must be found by expropriating the financial aristocracy. This is part of the struggle for a socialist society, in which the human needs of all are not held hostage to an unelected and parasitic oligarchy.



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