

Met Opera soloists oppose cuts as 2021–2022 season approaches

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With the date for its reopening less than four months away, the world-famous New York Metropolitan Opera still has no agreement with most of its musicians and other staff. The company closed its doors at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic almost 15 months ago.

Met management has been demanding 30 percent pay cuts from its employees, with the promise to restore only half of those cuts, and then only when box office revenue and donations return to pre-pandemic levels. Management locked out the hundreds of stagehands in IATSE Local 1, without whom no opera productions and performances are possible, six months ago when they refused to accept drastic cuts. The musicians of the world-famous Met Opera Orchestra, members of American Federation of Musicians Local 802, are still engaged in bargaining, with the union clearly prepared to accept pay cuts on a smaller scale than originally demanded.

Only the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), which negotiates for choristers and vocal soloists, has reached a tentative agreement, according to recent press reports. This deal has not yet been ratified, however. AGMA officials said the new contract would result in an initial pay cut of 3.7 percent for most employees, which it presents as a “victory” compared to management’s original demands. There are other significant cuts included in the agreement, however, beyond the reduction in pay. The number of full time members of the chorus will be cut from 80 to 74, and they will also be transferred out of their current health care plan, with major increases in out-of-pocket costs expected, according to a report in the *New York Times*.

Now a dramatic and somewhat unexpected development threatens to complicate management’s

plans to impose the cuts. According to sources within the company, more than 100 leading soloists—including famous artists whose names on forthcoming productions will attract returning opera fans—are rebelling against the concession demands. These singers, also under AGMA, are being asked to take cuts of up to 16 percent in their usual fees.

Their position is somewhat complicated because individual managers negotiate these fees, but they also fall under the AGMA umbrella. While they are more highly paid, these performers receive no medical coverage at all, and must pay out of pocket for all travel, hotel and other costs associated with US and international careers, while maintaining apartments in New York. Up to 140 of these soloists have voted to reject the concessions.

The contract negotiations at the Met do not of course take place in a vacuum. The reopening of the opera house is also threatened by the continuation of the pandemic itself. The Biden administration, and the Democratic New York governor and New York City mayor, have hastily proclaimed a “return to normalcy,” but the reopening of schools and the dropping of masking and social distancing requirements—along with the lag in vaccinations—are creating the conditions for a new wave of COVID-19 illness. As is widely understood, concert and opera venues will be among the last to return to full audiences.

Within this overall context the action of the Met soloists is significant. These professionally trained musicians spend 10 or even 20 years honing their skills and preparing for careers. In some respects, they have greater bargaining power because of their prominence and the fact that audiences know their names. They can set an example, not only for others at the Met and in the performing arts more broadly, but for the whole

working class.

The singers have rebelled against the union that claims to represent them, just as the Volvo workers in Virginia have overwhelmingly rejected two sellout contracts brought back to them by the United Auto Workers officials.

The *Times* quotes Sam Wheeler, the AGMA official who negotiated the proposed cuts for the chorus and soloists, speaking of “the shared sacrifice that we hope will get the Met open.”

Who is Mr. Wheeler talking about? The multimillionaire board of trustees of the Met have made no sacrifice at all. On the contrary, their net worth has skyrocketed during the pandemic, along with that of the whole ruling elite in New York and throughout the world.

The union has also apparently tried to use the “identity politics card,” sending the membership a video of an African American soloist talking about what are described as various “diversity, equity and inclusion” provisions in the new contract. This only demonstrates what is becoming more and more widely understood—corporate propaganda about “diversity,” part of the promotion of identity politics by the ruling class as a whole, is a hypocritical and reactionary tactic designed to divert attention from the issues facing all workers, whatever their race, ethnicity or gender.

The Met Opera, whatever its failings in the present world of culture dominated and run by the super-rich, is a vital institution for the opera world and for cultural life more generally. What gives the parasites who run the Met the right to demand—through their obedient agents in the unions—that those who make opera possible foot the bill for the crisis that is not of their making, and that is being used to step up the transfer of wealth from the working class to the top one-tenth of one percent?

The Met musicians have the opportunity to join with the Volvo workers in Virginia, the miners in Alabama, Amazon workers and millions of others who face the same essential issues, including the fight against concession demands in the midst of the massive sacrifices and losses of the COVID-19 pandemic.

First of all, it is necessary to recognize that concessions cannot be fought through the unions, that have in any event already accepted them, or, in the case of the bargaining agent for the stagehands at the Met,

announced that it is prepared for cuts, as long as they are not as drastic as those so far demanded by Met General Manager Peter Gelb. The Met musicians, choristers, stagehands, singers and others must instead reach out to workers and youth throughout New York City.

The support of wider layers of the population can and must be won, but only by raising the crucial political issues. We urge all Met staff to form a rank-and-file committee, independent of the trade unions. The unions are tied to management and, with their talk of “shared sacrifice,” begin with the needs of the capitalist status quo and not from the needs of cultural life, which includes meeting the needs of the cultural workers themselves.

The Met workers must connect their struggle to those of educators, autoworkers, Amazon workers and many others. The struggle they face raises above all the need for a socialist program and a socialist leadership that unites the fight to defend the right to culture with the defense of living standards and democratic rights.

Workers at the Met and in other areas of the performing arts are urged to contact the Socialist Equality Party if they agree with this program and perspective.



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