

Ticket-sellers' dispute with concert venue forces Baltimore Symphony Orchestra to relocate performances

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8 October 2021

An ongoing labor dispute between the Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda, Maryland, and its ticket office employees, represented by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Treasurers and Ticket Sellers Local 868 (IATSE 868), has forced the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (BSO) to relocate five of its season-opening concerts in the months of September and October. A strike ratification vote in August of workers organized in the local, which represents treasurers and ticket-sellers in Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia, passed unanimously.

The Local 868 vote to strike comes as a part of a massive wave of working class discontent against the immense exploitation they have been subjected to for decades, which the COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified. Thirty-six IATSE locals—13 on the West Coast, 23 across the rest of the country, collectively representing 60,000 members—voted by 98.6 percent to authorize a strike this week. The entertainment crew workers are opposing intolerable working conditions, including 12-hour shifts, which overwork them and put them in danger of catching COVID-19.

On Thursday, stagehands at Washington D.C.'s Kennedy Center voted to go on strike against what IATSE Local 22 representatives termed “draconian cuts and changes to working conditions,” which they said amounted to a 40 percent pay cut.

The Strathmore ticket sellers have been working without a contract for over two years. The IATSE Local 868 has been in dispute with Strathmore since May, when the venue proposed using ticket kiosks in the concert hall. The local was concerned that the machines would replace the ticket sellers despite assurances from

Strathmore CEO Monica Jeffries Hazangeles that the kiosks would merely act as a contactless option for concertgoers who have health concerns stemming from the pandemic.

In a press release dated September 24, the BSO said the venue change was made to give time for negotiation between Strathmore and IATSE 868, as well as an annual license agreement for the 2021–2022 season performances at Strathmore. Tonya McBride Robles, BSO Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, said that while the BSO was “willing to be flexible” with regards to the agreement, it “cannot agree to changes in our license agreement that require the BSO to compel our stagehands and musicians to cross a picket line and work with replacement workers.”

Strathmore laid off 19 workers in July 2020 due to financial difficulties during the pandemic; they had since been brought back on an “as needed” basis, according to a May article in *Bethesda* magazine. Hazangeles noted in the article that, even prior to the pandemic, 85 percent of ticket sales were made online.

Anne Vantine, the business agent for IATSE 868, disagreed with Hazangeles' assurances, stating, “That is a false narrative, in that there are ways that other venues, including the Kennedy Center, where I work, are putting systems in place, so that we can service the patrons. Because we do feel human interaction is important. And those people who come to the venue to purchase tickets aren't coming to the venue to use a machine.”

The dispute between the venue and IATSE amounts to a conflict over whether human or machine tellers are best suited for the effort to reopen all venues in pursuit of the capitalist class's catastrophic “herd immunity”

policies, which has been universally aided and abetted by the trade union bureaucracies wherever they are present. Under the conditions of a raging pandemic that has killed over 10,000 people in Maryland alone, the BSO has been operating throughout the most severe months of 2021.

The BSO has been heavily affected by the pandemic, which forced cancellations and rescheduling of indoor concerts, although no musicians were reported to have tested positive for the virus. The BSO received \$484,256 in financial pandemic relief in January 2021 as part of the state of Maryland's RELIEF Act of 2021. This crisis has only been intensified by the pandemic, with the BSO's president and CEO Peter Kjome telling the *Baltimore Sun* in January that the orchestra's budget was "still fragile."

While BSO management appeared to be concerned with "scabbing" on the Strathmore ticket sellers, it is more out of fear of a parallel strike breaking out with its musicians. The BSO musicians, affiliated with the American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada (AFM) Local 40-543, were at the center of a contract dispute and strike against BSO management in 2019 when the musicians were locked out in May following a decision by management to cancel its summer concerts.

The strike ended in 2019 with musicians being forced to accept most of management's demands. At the time, the BSO leadership had cited revenue losses of \$16 million to justify its cutbacks such as, among other things, shortening the season by 12 weeks and reducing vacation from nine weeks to four. In August last year, a new five-year contract was announced that would include a 26 percent cut in base scale, along with drastic reductions in over-scale and seniority, followed by yearly pay raises from the pre-COVID level, raises which hardly make up for the cut. Summer concerts have not resumed since.

Notably, Brian Precht, the co-chair of the Baltimore Symphony Musicians Players' Committee, did not provide any comments to the press regarding the Strathmore-IATSE 868 dispute. In August 2020 Precht had said that the musicians "are so pleased" with their new barebones contract.

The ticket-sellers' struggle is a part of a larger working class struggle which combines auto workers, teachers, coal miners, carpenters and food industry

workers in simultaneous opposition to the diktats of corporate management. Artistic and cultural life in recent decades, however, has taken repeated hits as orchestra managements, not just in Baltimore, have enforced drastic pay cuts to its musicians, citing millions of dollars in losses as a reason. COVID-19 has only further exacerbated this problem as concerts are canceled. The people who help run the concert halls are just as affected by these cuts.

The Strathmore ticket sellers must form rank-and-file committees to link up their struggles with those of other workers throughout the country and globe. A special appeal must be made to the theatre and film production crew workers currently in a struggle against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). Despite the immense power bound up with a bicoastal struggle of entertainment industry workers, the IATSE Local 868 has made no effort to appeal for assistance from its west coast affiliates.

In the meantime, the call must again be raised for these venues to remain closed as long as a deadly pandemic is still around. Full income must be given to these ticket-sellers, musicians and others who help make the theater-going experience. Fundamentally, workers must direct their struggles against the capitalist system, which is forcing them to pick between livelihood and their lives amid the COVID-19 pandemic. We encourage ticket-sellers to write to the *World Socialist Web Site* to speak out on their struggle and to sign up for and attend the WSWs's October 24 online event, "How to End the Pandemic: The Case for Eradication."



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