

Australian Ballet dancers launch industrial action against attacks on pay

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Last Friday night, dancers from the internationally acclaimed Australian Ballet company took limited industrial action—the first for more than four decades—in their dispute with management over a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

The action occurred at the State Theatre in the Melbourne Arts Centre and involved “holding the curtain”—i.e., delaying the evening performance of *Identity*, the company’s latest production, for 15 minutes.

It followed an April ballot overseen by the Fair Work Commission in which 91 percent of the more than 70 dancers at the company voted for industrial action, beginning with a social media campaign and strike action.

The social media campaign, which commenced last week, has drawn attention to the cost-of-living challenges facing dancers and the need to rectify the significant financial sacrifices they have been forced to make over the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign has already gained extensive online public support.

Negotiations over the three-year EBA between the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), which covers the dancers, and ballet company management began last September. Talks are deadlocked over the management’s refusal to maintain a long-standing clause guaranteeing dancers’ wages increase in line with the rising Consumer Price Index (CPI).

The CPI clause, which has been part of dancers’ work agreements for more than two decades, recognises that dancers face a unique situation because of their short careers in the profession.

As was the case throughout the entertainment sector, when the pandemic began it was used to launch major attacks on the rights of the dancers. Pay rates were torn

up virtually overnight.

This was imposed, at Australian Ballet and more broadly, by the MEAA. The union negotiated an agreement with company management in 2020, under which ballet dancers were saddled with a 50 percent pay cut amid lockdowns and other restrictions that prevented live performances. The following year, the MEAA negotiated a pay freeze.

Similar deals were imposed elsewhere. At the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, for instance, the MEAA agreed to a 40 percent salary cut and a clause that meant twenty vacant positions would not be filled for two years. MEAA official Paul Davies told the press: “The Sydney Symphony Orchestra’s collaborative approach, which delivered a very constructive result without industrial conflict, is a best practice model for other Australian cultural organisations.”

In other words, the wage-slashing agreements at top-tier cultural institutions served as a precedent for attacks throughout the entertainment and arts sectors.

In February this year, the Australian Ballet dancers received what management described as a 4.3 percent “catch-up” pay rise to meet the obligations of the CPI clause, after receiving only 2.5 percent in 2022 when inflation peaked at over 7 percent. Management has “offered” a 1 percent pay rise for 2023. The latest below-inflation offer has been rejected by the dancers under conditions of rising interest rate, rents and spiralling food, energy, and petrol costs.

Ballet dancers’ wages are shockingly low. Like elite athletes, they must dedicate years or decades of their life to the most intensive and all-consuming training, to hone world-class skills. The physical rigours mean that their careers are inherently of a limited duration (see: “Australian ballet dancer speaks on fights against pay cuts, conditions during the pandemic”).

But under current rates, most dancers at the Australia Ballet earn less than \$A80,000 per annum, with base rates climbing to just under \$100,000 for a senior dancer and a little over \$150,000 for a principal. That compares with pay rates of hundreds of thousands, or even more, for some athletes who face similar career challenges.

The Australian Ballet, which was formed in 1962, is funded primarily through its own commercial and fundraising activities, including bequests, with limited amounts provided by the federal, New South Wales and Victorian governments through the Australia Council for the Arts.

Arts funding has been drastically reduced by consecutive federal Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments over the past two decades, a process accelerated during the pandemic.

According to the Fund the Arts Coalition, the then Liberal-National Coalition government slashed arts funding in its 2022 budget by 19 percent compared to the previous year. While the MEAA have praised slight increases in arts funding by the Albanese Labor government, these are a drop in the ocean and do not come close to merely reversing the previous onslaught.

The national arts budget is minuscule compared to the billions spent on tax cuts for the rich and for new weapons and war.

The last time Australian Ballet performers took industrial action was in 1981 when they stopped work for 26 days, resulting in the cancellation of several performances of the *Three Musketeers*. The action was the outcome of several leading dancers being offered reduced conditions of work.

In 2017, the dancers filed for “protected” action with Fair Work Australia due to a deadlock in agreement negotiations. A deal was finally signed without industrial action that guaranteed wages would align with CPI, the clause the company is presently trying to remove.

Australian Ballet management responded to last Friday’s limited industrial action by cancelling a one-off bonus performance of a scheduled new short work to occur that night. Management is now demanding that the MEAA agrees to a “limited cap” on CPI increases for dancers.

The “limited cap”, while disingenuously not spelled

out in the management’s media statement, is presently being negotiated at 1.5 percent. The management’s offer of 1 percent for this year and the 1.5 percent CPI “cap” would amount to a 2.5 percent wages deal for the next 12 months, well below inflation which is still running at over 6 percent. In union negotiations, the management is also arguing that the CPI “cap” be embedded in the present agreement but phased out completely over time.

The dancers who have already indicated their willingness to fight with a 91 percent vote for industrial action need to be warned. No faith can be placed in the MEAA to take forward the struggle. The union has demonstrated its role, not only during the pandemic, but in imposing years of cuts at other institutions, such as the major publishers and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The dancers should instead turn to the growing struggles of workers, in Australia and internationally. Whatever the differences in occupations, all of these movements are being fuelled by the same issues of pay cuts, amid the worst cost of living crisis in decades, together with attacks on working conditions.

A particular appeal could be made to other entertainment workers, whose plight directly parallels that of the dancers. A unified movement must be developed, not only to win back the huge concessions imposed during the first years of the pandemic, but to defend the arts, which are under attack everywhere by the corporations and the governments that represent them.

To develop such a struggle, dancers should form their own organisation, a rank-and-file committee independent of the MEAA leadership, which can overcome the isolation of the dispute and turn out to other sections for a unified fight.



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