

“If we set a precedent then we can raise the standard for everyone”

Australian ballet dancer speaks on fight against pay cuts, conditions during pandemic

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On Saturday, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with an Australian Ballet company dancer, as well as theatre patrons attending a matinee performance of *Identity*.

The dancers have initiated a campaign against attempts by the company to slash their pay. As part of this, the dancers held a 15-minute stoppage before a Friday evening performance, the first industrial action by this section of performers in more than four decades.

The Australian Ballet dancer, who wished to remain anonymous, said: “Our first action has been via a social media campaign. We have received support from fellow artists in Australia, other dance companies and internationally. They have shared our message. The response from the general public and patrons has been the same. Many have emailed the company saying, ‘You need to listen to the dancers.’”

WSWS: Could you explain some of the financial stresses dancers have endured in the past period?

Dancer: “Over the last few years, we have faced huge disruption. For some dancers it just wiped out our savings. We have had dancers who have had to cancel health insurance, dancers who have had to sacrifice the quality of the food they’re eating just to be able to eat.

“For a time, our heads were just floating above water and then with inflation and prices rising, we are really feeling the financial strain, just like a lot of other people have.”

WSWS: What sort of sacrifices do dancers make to join the company?

Dancer: “We all love what we do, it’s a huge commitment. The physicality of ballet often requires you starting at a very early age so your body can adapt. To be able to facilitate a career in ballet, you must put

the human body into positions that may not be anatomically natural. So, you need to start early to train the body to be able to make the shapes that are necessary.

“Some dancers don’t complete a full high school education, which can have implications later if you have to retire early and that means you have to start all over again.

“Of course, elite sports people make sacrifices too but there are so many hurdles to get into the ballet company. First you usually have to get into the ballet school but then the company only takes eight out of eighteen from the school. Some years only one dancer has been selected. That is just to get into the company. At the moment there are just over 70 dancers in the company.”

WSWS: Could you describe the skills, discipline and dedication required?

Dancer: “Our bodies are like our instruments. We work 10.30 a.m. till 6.30 p.m. every day during rehearsal period. That doesn’t include all the hours of extra physical work, like gym and other conditioning—Yoga, Pilates—and of course recovery.

“Some dancers arrive an hour and a half before we start classes at nine o’clock. They do an hour and a half extra unpaid exercise just to make sure that their body is able to do their job, to have the strength and flexibility required.

“It is physically and emotionally taxing. And unlike other sports, we don’t have an ‘on and off season.’ Our season is from January through to December. We have no ‘off season’ but have to maintain peak performance for the whole year.

“And a lifespan as a dancer is limited. A longitudinal

study from the 1960s until around 2015 showed that the median age of retirement was 27 years old. I've known people to retire from ballet at 22 years old and then others at 42. And if you are not going to stay in the ballet world then you need to start all over again. Some dancers try to get a university degree at the same time so that they have another future."

WSWS: What are the next steps?

Dancer: "It's always a very hard decision to take industrial action because there is so much love and respect for what we do, and we have great respect for the audience. We never want to detract from someone's experience of coming to the theatre.

"Some independent artists don't even have the same conditions as we do but if we set a precedent then we can raise the standard for everyone.

"The dancers that have come before us have left a legacy of good workplace rights and conditions. They have sacrificed a lot to procure these conditions and we are going to fight to keep them."

WSWS reporters spoke to theatre patrons who expressed their support for the dancers.

Mari, Jan and Helen have been attending Australian ballet performances for 25, 15 and 8 years respectively. Helen said, "It's not a bargain going to the ballet, but you're prepared to pay it because you want to support them. The dancers are just as important as a lot of the sports people who are always supported. During COVID they couldn't put on performances and so the dancers are now trying to make up for their losses and sacrifices."

Judy, who is 84 years old, has attended the ballet since she was at school. Judy bought her granddaughter, Courtney, a ticket to the ballet as a birthday present.

"They certainly have my support. I think it stinks. The dancers are the Australian Ballet! I was speechless when I heard about it. The company carry on about how wonderful they are, and they are, but then they want to cut their pay. The government should stop building tunnels and give them what they need."



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