

Broadway stagehands return to work after union accepts concessions

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The 19-day strike by Broadway stagehands ended after negotiators between their union—IATSE Local 1—and the owners and producers reached an agreement late Wednesday night on a tentative settlement that includes significant attacks on work rules and jobs for the approximately 350 workers employed at the major theaters.

The executive director of the League of American Theatres and Producers, Charlotte St. Martin, described the pact as “a good compromise that serves our industry.”

Local 1 officials provided no details on the agreement, sending their members back to work without any information, much less a ratification vote, which will not take place for at least 10 days.

The strike, the first in the local’s 120-year history, was forced on the stagehands after management unilaterally imposed work rules contained in its “final offer.” Even then, the union instructed its members to continue working under this setup for more than two weeks before calling the strike on November 10.

The walkout won broad support from actors and musicians as well as makeup, wardrobe, box office and other theater workers, many of whom joined the Local 1 picket lines. At the same time, the stagehands came under sharp political pressure, with the city estimating economic losses of \$2 million a day resulting from the strike and the mass media fraudulently blaming Broadway’s shutdown on the workers rather than the owners.

Management itself entered the struggle prepared for an all-out offensive against the workers, having raised a \$25 million war chest through per-ticket assessments. The owners’ willingness to keep 27 theaters dark during one of the most profitable seasons of the year was a measure of their ruthlessness and determination

to break down barriers to increased profits.

Local 1 also faced significant pressure from its parent union, whose president, Thomas Short, joined the negotiations and supported acceptance of the producers’ takeaway demands before they were rejected by the local leadership and talks collapsed on November 18. Before the walkout began, it had been widely anticipated that Short would deny the local strike authorization. Theater workers reported that in 2003, when the musicians union staged a four-day strike, Short had instructed Broadway stagehands to cross their picket lines, something that the workers refused to do.

Details leaked to the media about the contract make it clear that the Local 1 leadership yielded to these pressures, effectively trading employment for its members for a modest increase in wages.

At the heart of the dispute was management’s demand for changes in the contract to allow the slashing of costs by scrapping work rules governing hiring requirements and overtime. The theater owners claimed that the rules led to “featherbedding.” The stagehands, however, insisted that the drive to slash jobs and thereby boost profits threatened safety in the theaters and would ultimately create unworkable part-time jobs from which many would not be able to earn a decent living.

According to media reports, the union settled for a five-year contract including wage increases above the annual 3.5 percent included in the league’s previous final offer.

In terms of concessions, the union agreed to new rules that allow the owners to reduce to 17 the daily minimum number of stagehands hired for the “load-in,” the arduous job of moving tons of machinery, scenery, lighting, sound systems and other equipment into the

theaters and setting it up for the production.

The longstanding rule that existed under the previous contract required the theaters to continue employing all of those hired at the start of the load-in—generally considerably more than 17—until the entire process was completed. The previous minimum for load-ins was 22 stagehands.

Another giveback reportedly included in the pact involves what is known as the continuity call, which involves management's right to ask stagehands to work an extra hour before or after a performance, either setting up the stage or preparing it for the next day. Under the previous agreement, if the call involved more than one hour's work, the owners would have to extend the work call to four hours. The union insisted that the rule was meant to discourage theater owners from keeping stagehands—many of whom work other day jobs—working past midnight.

The inevitable result of these concessions will be to force stagehands to compete for fewer jobs.

The outcome of the strike is very much in continuity with that of the musicians' walkout in 2003. Both expressed the unwillingness and inability of the unions to wage the kind of struggle required to defeat the relentless drive of the owners and producers to increase profits.

In the musicians' case, the owners and producers sought to pave the way to the elimination of live music on Broadway and its replacement with virtual, electronic orchestras. The settlement that ended the strike included significant cuts in what were already sharply reduced employment minimums for Broadway musicals.

No doubt, actors organized in Actors Equity will be the target for similar takeaway demands when their contract expires next year.

The producers' campaign to destroy jobs on Broadway in order to boost profits has gone hand-in-hand with the steady raising of ticket prices to a level that is well out of reach of much of the population of New York City and the country as a whole. At the same time, wealthy investors and entertainment corporations favor shows seen as the safest commodities—revivals, musicalizations of popular films and even cartoons and shows featuring TV stars—at the expense of artistic innovation and creativity.

Ultimately, the defense of jobs for the entire theater

industry—actors, musicians, stagehands and others—cannot be waged successfully based on a trade union perspective, but requires a social and political struggle to secure a massive increase in public support for the arts and to make theater, music and other artistic work accessible to far broader layers of the population.

Such a struggle requires the political mobilization of working people, including those in theater and the arts, against the current social and political setup that subordinates not only culture and art, but all human needs, to the relentless drive for profit and the ever-greater enrichment of a financial elite.



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