

As Broadway stagehand talks resume

IATSE president blasts writers' strike

By a reporting team
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As Broadway stagehands began their second week on the picket lines over the weekend, their union, the International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) Local 1, and the League of American Theaters and Producers resumed negotiations aimed at reaching a deal that would end a strike that has left most of New York's major theaters shuttered.

As of this writing, no agreement has been announced, and picketing continues at the 27 struck theaters. The talks are the first held since negotiations broke off on November 8.

The theater owners and producers reportedly remain intransigent over their principal demands for scrapping work rules setting the minimum number of stagehands that must be hired for a production. The effect of the rule change, strikers and their union charge, would be to drastically reduce wages and jobs on Broadway and turn many stagehands into part-time employees.

The human cost of the strike made itself tragically felt Friday night outside the Minskoff Theatre, home of *The Lion King*, where Frank Lavaia, the show's 57-year-old prop master and a veteran stagehand and master carpenter, had a heart attack while picketing and died later at a local hospital. Striking workers donned black armbands and continued picketing after a short memorial service outside the Minskoff Saturday.

"When we do the eulogies at every show, we will think of Frank and there will be tears," said a wardrobe worker walking the picket line Saturday in support of the stagehands. "He had two sons and a cousin who work here. It is horrible." She said that five members of her union were on the picket line. "We're all in support of Local 1."

Meanwhile, the economic impact of the strike—the first in the local's 120-year history—is being measured in the tens of millions of dollars. The city of New York

estimates that the local economy is losing about \$2 million a day due to a fall-off in revenues for hotels, bars and restaurants in the theater district. An indication of the direct costs to the theaters can be gauged by the box office recorded for two of the more popular shows in the last full week before the strike. During that week, *Jersey Boys* and *Wicked* grossed, respectively, \$1,217,333 and \$1,335,757.

On the picket line at the Nederlander Theatre, where *Rent* had been showing, a stagehand expressed his frustration with the producers' intransigence and their failure to acknowledge the importance of the stagehands' labor.

"It takes three years of apprenticeship to become a member," he said. "You have to make a certain amount of dollars over those three years. Then you have to go the Metropolitan Opera House and other locations. You have to be trained, because nobody wants someone rigging up 12 or 13 tons of props for scenery for a show who doesn't know what they're doing.

"We will stay out here forever, and you can quote me on that," he said.

The determination and solidarity of the strikers and their supporters on Broadway stood in sharp contrast to the attack on the two-week-old writers' strike by their national union's leader, IATSE President Tom Short, who came into New York over the weekend to participate in the resumed talks.

In a November 13 letter to the president of the Writers Guild of America-West (WGA), Patric Verrone, Short blamed the union for "causing irreparable damage to the industry at a time when we can all ill afford to ignore the worsening national economy, the unstable international climate, and the crises in health care and the housing market that are affecting many of our working families."

Short claimed that he had “predicted the devastation that would come from your actions,” adding, “Those predictions have now come true.”

He further accused the WGA executive director of not being “a responsible labor leader, someone dedicated to the preservation of an industry that has supported the economies of several major cities for decades.”

Short’s reactionary tirade amounts to a brief for the conglomerates that control the entertainment industry and a proscription against any form of struggle that challenges their profit interests.

Their significance for striking stagehands in New York is unmistakable. The same charges that he levels against the striking writers can be—and have been—turned against the Broadway stagehands themselves. And there can be no doubt that based on this outlook, he will work through the negotiations to end the walkout on terms set by the producers and theater owners.

The record of the IATSE international leadership on this score is well known. In 2001, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it was Short who quickly negotiated a temporary 25 percent pay cut for his members that was subsequently forced upon all the unions in response to the claims by the owners and producers that it was the only way to revive Broadway. And, in 2003, the international reportedly sought to force stagehands to cross the picket lines of striking musicians during their four-day strike. The Broadway stagehands refused, however, and stayed out of work.

It was also rumored before the Broadway walkout that Short had seen and approved of the producers’ final offer and had assured them he would not authorize a strike

While the content of Short’s letter to the WGA was not widely known among those walking the picket lines Saturday, several expressed disgust and sharp disagreement with his attack.

“I support the writers’ strike and everyone on this picket line supports their strike,” a striking stagehand and utility worker picketing outside the Nedlander Theatre told the WSWS. “This is my perception of what all my fellow strikers think. It’s a shame that the unions have lost a lot of influence over the years.”

An actress in *The Lion King* and member of the Screen Actors’ Guild picketing in front of the

Minskoff said: “This is the first time I heard of Short condemning the WGA strike. I support the writers’ strike. Maybe some of the writers make a lot of money, but most do not. They have the same financial struggles just like any other worker. As a dancer in this play, I support these guys I work with. Most of the actors have been on this picket line supporting this strike.”

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