

New York's Metropolitan Opera demands major givebacks from thousands of employees

By Fred Mazelis
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With less than a month to go before the expiration of contracts with 15 unions representing musicians, choristers, stagehands and other employees of the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, negotiations have stalled as management demands major cuts in pay and benefits.

Met general manager Peter Gelb has taken to various media outlets to publicize his warning that the world-famous opera company could face bankruptcy within several years unless its workers grant givebacks of 16 percent in pay and benefits. "I'm just trying to address this problem a few steps before the edge of the precipice instead of waiting until we are actually on the precipice," he told BBC Radio.

The opera company has made its case through press releases and financial statements. Gelb points to attendance figures, which have fallen from 92 percent of capacity in 2008, before the financial crash, to 79 percent in 2013. He argues that the Met faces imminent danger because its endowment has fallen to \$236 million, below its annual expenses of \$317 million, and he compares this to healthier fiscal balance sheets at other major opera companies and orchestras.

Management says that its labor costs amount to \$200 million annually, nearly two-thirds of its total expenses. It also points to average pay of \$200,000 a year for Met musicians and chorus members, as well as high earnings for the stagehands and other skilled workers. Gelb declares that he will take the same cut in pay that he is demanding of the employees, and his base pay was reduced to \$1.395 million this past spring, a cut of 10 percent.

Musicians Local 802 responded to the management demands by arguing that the Gelb administration has squandered money on expensive new productions that have not attracted a large enough audience. Other

observers and music critics have made their own suggestions, including changes in pricing and other proposals, in order to overcome the crisis.

These responses avoid the big questions in the Met negotiations. The issues raised go far beyond the immediate circumstances of the opera company itself. They are the product of the increasingly blatant and destructive stranglehold of the super-rich over all aspects of culture and public life.

This was displayed only a week ago by the cowardly and contradictory announcement from Gelb himself that—in response to demands from the right-wing Zionist lobby—he was canceling plans for the worldwide broadcast of John Adams' *The Death of Klinghoffer*, while still continuing with plans for eight performances at the opera house.

This decision was essentially dictated by the billionaires, or at least an influential section of them. And these same billionaires are now demanding that the wages and living standards of those who make the opera possible be given up, while the fortunes of the 1 percent and the one tenth of one percent continue to soar.

This was essentially what the Met Opera board of trustees declared in an ad in the *New York Times* last week, warning that "the level of giving simply cannot continue to grow faster than our rising costs." This sums up the arrogance of the layer of bankers and hedge fund managers, whose own assets have been growing 10, 100 and 1,000 times faster than the city's spending on social and public services and cultural subsidies.

New York is a city in which penthouse apartments in new high-rises are being marketed daily for tens of millions of dollars. At the same time, the timid proposal by so-called "progressive" mayor Bill de

Blasio for a few pennies in tax increases from the billionaires and multimillionaires was shot down without a whimper of protest.

The *New York Times* also weighed in this week, reflecting the importance attached by the financial and political establishment to the precedent that will be set by the Met Opera contracts. The leading organ of American capitalism, feigning neutrality, chose its words carefully in an editorial on June 20, saying that “both sides should compromise on real cuts.” The *Times*’ idea of “equal sacrifice” means that the unions must “[accept] changes in benefits and work rules. Management will have to cut salaries and expenses just as rigorously.”

Of course this means no sacrifices from the super-rich. On the contrary it is the overpaid “riffraff” that must make up the deficit.

The claim that supposedly high salaries and overtime are to blame for the Met’s crisis is aimed at whipping up divisions within the working class. Just as allegedly high-paid and inadequate teachers are blamed for the crisis in public education, and the pensions of public employees are blamed for the fiscal crises of states and municipalities, so the finger is pointed at the opera musicians, choristers and stagehands. And this means that a further precedent will be set for attacks on every section of workers.

The concession demands at the Met follow the bitter strike several years ago at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the bankruptcy filing of the world-renowned Philadelphia Orchestra and the recent disappearance of the New York City Opera, the “people’s opera,” beloved of New York audiences since its founding in 1944. Numerous smaller opera companies and orchestras around the US have also collapsed in the past few years.

Of course the wealthy members of the Met board and their friends and business associates could cover the fiscal problems of the opera company many times over. More fundamentally, however, the resources of society as a whole must be rationally allotted to art forms such as opera and other products of human culture and scientific progress.

The hypocritical noises from the political establishment and their cultural representatives about expanding the opera audience mean nothing, and accomplish nothing. The problems of the Met could be

solved through the combination of massive public subsidies, the expansion of arts education from the earliest grades and a sharp reduction in ticket prices to make them affordable to working people.

These measures, of course, constitute a challenge to the capitalist status quo. They will require the development of a mass movement in defense of culture, as well as living standards. The struggle of millions of workers, taking their future into their own hands, is the key to the creation of new audiences. This in turn requires the independent political mobilization of the working class, on the basis of a socialist program, for the democratic reorganization of economic life.

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