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Oregon Shakespeare Festival goes union

Backstage crew members vote to join the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees

ASHLAND—Backstage crew members at Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in Ashland voted 37 to 25 to unionize with International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) in a June 10 election overseen by the National Labor Relations Board.

The lead-up to the vote lacked the rancor of union campaigns elsewhere: Union supporters never trashed managers, and managers kept their “anti” campaign fairly mellow.

“[The union organizing committee] kept up a positive message,” said IATSE organizer Chris “Radar” Bateman. “They’re doing this for the right reasons.”

In the final weeks before the vote, OSF executive director Cynthia Rider and production director Alys Holden held voluntary-attendance anti-union meetings at which crew members

were served bran muffins and paid for their time. At the meetings, the managers painted the union as an outside “third party,” and suggested that employees would be under the direction of a powerful union president if they went with IATSE. Management fliers posted in the workplace also framed the election as a vote of confidence in management: If you believe managers have done a great job, and are trying to close the pay gap, you should vote no, the fliers said.

Union supporters rejected that framework: Managers are doing a fine job, they said, but workers want a voice in setting their terms and conditions,

and the security of a written agreement.

“I think the employer’s taking [the union drive] really hard,” Bateman said. “I don’t think they realize this means workers want a long-term commitment. They’re done dating now. They’re getting married, and they

want a pre-nup.”

In the end, three-fifths of the workers voted for the union. The job of union supporters will now be to earn the trust of the other two-fifths, and invite them to participate as union members in drafting proposals to take to the employer, Bateman said.

After the vote, OSF human resources director Pam Wallize e-mailed employees offering sessions with professional workplace coaches to mend relationships that might have frayed during the campaign.

“We value the diverse ideas and the opinions that were evident during the campaign,” Wallize wrote. “They serve to illustrate the strong commitment our staff has to OSF.”

Bateman predicted bargaining will result in a unique union contract tailored to OSF. The bargaining unit will consist of employees who work on lighting, video and projections, sound, stage operations, wardrobe, wig and hair during the nine months of the year

when plays are being performed. They’re part of a much larger workforce of up to 500, which includes actors, ticket sellers, and workers who create costumes and construct the sets.

When a first collective bargaining agreement is ratified, IATSE would issue a charter for a new union local in Ashland.

“We have an opportunity at OSF to create our own local and really celebrate the crazy magic that we do here with a contract that reflects that,” said sound engineer Amanda Sager, a member of the organizing committee.

“As we move forward, we’ll make this work, and we’ll continue to be a great organization,” said OSF spokesperson Amy Richard.



Between 2003 and 2012, new IRS stats show, the average income tax rate paid by America’s bottom 99 percent rose from 9.6 to 10.4 percent. In the same years, the tax rate paid by the top 0.001 percent — Americans making over \$62 million in 2012 — fell from 20.6 to 17.6 percent.

— From Too Much, an Institute for Policy Studies monthly online publication.

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