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INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF THEATRICAL STAGE EMPLOYEES, MOVING PICTURE TECHNICIANS,  
ARTISTS AND ALLIED CRAFTS OF THE UNITED STATES, ITS TERRITORIES AND CANADA

March 4, 2021

Sent Via Email and First-Class Mail ([pressline@fordfoundation.org](mailto:pressline@fordfoundation.org))

Darren Walker  
President  
Ford Foundation  
320 East 43<sup>rd</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10017

Dear President Walker:

As the President of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), I want to bring to your attention an important and troubling issue related to the Ford Foundation's funding of the opera *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, scheduled to premiere September 27, 2021 at The Metropolitan Opera.

The IATSE is the largest union representing backstage workers in the United States and Canada. Our members at The Met have been very excited that this story based on the memoir of New York Times Columnist Charles Blow and directed by Terence Blanchard will open the Opera's 2021-2022 season. As I am sure you're aware, this is the first opera by a Black composer to be staged by the nation's leading opera company.

Our skilled craftspeople employed by The Met were eager and prepared to begin building sets for the premiere. However, in December, the opera company's general manager Peter Gelb made the decision to lock out the craftspeople, members of IATSE Local 1, who have built the scenery at the Metropolitan Opera for decades. This is depriving them of an income and health benefits payments at a time when they have been out of work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Simply put, Gelb coldly and cruelly has chosen to use the crisis caused by COVID-19 as leverage rather than engaging in collective bargaining negotiations.

This is a challenging time, not only for those who work in the performing arts but also for our employers. For that reason, the skilled stage technicians whom we represent have been more than willing to make accommodations as we have done with various employers in the performing arts. But Gelb has refused to negotiate. He has begun outsourcing the work for *Fire Shut Up In My Bones* to a non-union shop on the west coast. He also is preparing to outsource work for at least two

other opera productions abroad. At a time when our members have not worked in nearly a year, Gelb has made the cruel decision to inflict more financial harm, taking away solid, middle-class jobs from workers who have sustained the Met for years.

President Walker, you are a highly respected leader in the philanthropic community and also the New York arts world as a member of the board at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. I ask you to please use your influence with The Met to correct this injustice.

I ask you, as a partner with The Met and as a patron of the arts, to contact The Met's management and urge them to reinstate those who have been locked out. If Gelb refuses, the Foundation should rescind its grant or postpone the production until this matter is resolved.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter. If you would like to discuss this issue in more detail by phone with me or with a member of my staff, please contact our Co-Director of Stagecraft Joe Hartnett at [jhartnett@iatse.net](mailto:jhartnett@iatse.net).

Sincerely,



Matthew D. Loeb  
International President