

Caregivers' Speech

Substantive work is what I think we're all looking for: work that means something, work that challenges us, work that makes a difference. Sometimes that's a meaty role, sometimes it's being a modest part of a terrific production, sometimes it's just a job that makes a significant contribution to our monthly nut.

As I travel the country during our centennial celebration, I am struck by how rare those opportunities are for most members. How can your elected leaders and your staff create more opportunities for substantive work? How do we turn non-union employers into union employers? What other similar work might we organize? How can we improve the wages and working conditions of the contracts we currently have? How can we make it more possible for our members to do more of the work they love and make a fair wage while doing so?

I recently read some doomsday article in the newspaper about the decline in education skills in the US and the concomitant lack of skilled workers. The article also discussed the polarization of the workforce between well-paying jobs for skilled laborers and low-paying/minimum wage jobs for unskilled laborers as middle-skill jobs and good-paying low-skill/no-skill jobs disappear.

Our industry has a much different problem: we have too many skilled workers. The number of colleges and universities offering a degree in Theater or Musical Theater has increased dramatically (sorry) in the last couple decades. Thousands and thousands of well-trained actors and stage managers are added every year to a work force that has the capacity to absorb only hundreds. The good news/bad news side effect of this is that these universities employ hundreds of our members (Yay!) to teach these aspiring actors and stage managers and frequently pay them shamefully low wages (Boo!) as instructors or adjunct professors with no health or retirement coverage. (I was delighted to hear at the AFL-CIO convention of the efforts of the United Steelworkers (!) to organize adjunct professors at Duquesne University.)

You don't have to be an economist to understand the downward pressure that a surplus of highly skilled workers places on wages. Live Theater has always had far fewer work opportunities than qualified workers; the situation is only getting worse. So what are we going to do about it?

At our recent plenary session, Council voted to reinvigorate the Executive Committee established in our Constitution. This 17-person body will deal with issues that need a quick response before the next Council meeting. It is my hope that eventually the Executive Committee -- which is not empowered to create or change Association policy -- will take on all the regular boiler-plate work (such as receiving of reports, approving schedules, negotiating teams, committee appointments, etc.) so that the full National Council, which including emeritus councilors numbers 93 (talk about your surplus of skilled workers), can bring their full focus to policy questions such as the ones detailed above.

You have an excellent staff and an extraordinary body of elected leaders -- all volunteer, all dedicated -- working for you. Like you, we are just looking for Substantive Work. I think we've found ours. I hope we can help you find yours.