

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Emma Cohen

Generating Solidarity, Even Through Screens

by Emma Cohen*

For freelance dancers, it is not unusual to work for below minimum wage, or for barter, or for free. It doesn't feel strange to work without a contract or formal agreement. After all, the dance world is small—our employers and coworkers are familiar, if not truly familial. But where should a freelance dancer go for support if they get injured? Or face harassment? Or if weeks have gone by and no paycheck has materialized?

The Dance Artists' National Collective (DANC) has been holding meetings since early 2019 to discuss the possibility of forming a union for freelance dancers, and to imagine what such a union might look like. Although the group has found support and partnership with the American Guild of Musical Artists, they are in many ways envisioning new methods to meet the unique needs of freelance dance artists. As outlined in the group's tenets, DANC ultimately aims to "create safe, equitable, and sustainable working conditions for freelance dancers."

To explore the challenges and possibilities of collective organizing, the unique pressures of this pandemic, and the structures and ideas offered by DANC, I spoke with Megan Wright [portrayed above]. A freelance dancer and arts administrator who lives on Lenape and Canarsie lands in Brooklyn, Wright serves as a volunteer on DANC's steering committee and will be studying labor relations at CUNY this fall.?

Emma Cohen: In some ways, the pandemic seems to be underscoring what has been true about the dance world for a long time. It's not news that freelance dance work is precarious and unprotected, but that reality feels heightened these days.

Megan Wright: It's absolutely felt very true. One piece of rhetoric that was floating around at the beginning of the pandemic was this idea that it's going to affect everybody equally. That is bullshit. People are dying based on their race and their class, their geographic location, and whether or not they've been granted access to quality healthcare over the course of their lives. We're going to see that play out in the dance world as well: the institutions and the people who are going to survive are going to be the ones who have access

to capital via familial and/or inherited wealth, endowments, real estate, and all the other resources that come to those who benefit from "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" — to use the phrase bell hooks coined to describe the interlocking systems that are the foundation of this country's politics.

My biggest fear out of the pandemic is that we're going to see a retrenchment of white supremacy in our dominant cultural organizations. I think that we have to be diligent about pushing back *now* about not letting that happen. If we don't, the only people who are going to come out of this are the people who were already on top.

EC: At DANC's community response meetings, what have you been hearing from dancers about how the pandemic has been affecting them?

MW: We've heard so much from people getting cancellation letters that did not acknowledge the financial impact of those cancellations. I think that reflects our need for a structure that upholds artistic work as real work. Some dancers think: am I even allowed to have a conversation about money? What do I need to do for the person who's hired me to acknowledge that a cancellation is both a professional crisis and a financial hit, and not just a bummer?

The most heartening has been the stories of people being treated well, stories of gigs being canceled and people getting paid for them anyway. Choreographers saying, "I've raised this money, it's okay that we can't do the performance, I'm going to pay you for it." We've had people in the room saying, "I am a choreographer, and I want to pay my dancers more, can we talk about this?" That has been really wonderful to hear.

EC: Very simply, what is DANC? How is it structured?

MW: DANC is you. It is a group of dancers who care about what's happening. Point blank. If you show up to a meeting, congratulations, you are DANC! You don't need to pass a test to get in. You don't need to pay dues to get in. You just show up and you talk about what you care about.

The steering committee is a group of volunteers who agree to share the administrative labor and the nominal costs associated with keeping an organization like this going. So, managing the Instagram account and sending out the e-blast and paying for the website and premium Zoom. But, ultimately, this is an open structure, and if you come in with something that you care about [and] that you want to work on in community, then DANC is the place to do that.

EC: One of the group's tenets is that "DANC has no position on issues except for those positions agreed upon by a majority of its members." Bearing this in mind, what are some of the main concerns of the group at the moment?

MW: Some of the things that we agree on are pretty clear. For instance, dancers should be classified as employees and not independent contractors. There's obviously an insane cost associated with hiring somebody as an employee and not an independent contractor. But as a dancer you show up at a certain time, you are asked to do a certain job—the IRS would classify you as an employee. You should be eligible for workers compensation if you get injured, you should be eligible for unemployment when you don't have your job. So that [the idea that dancers should be hired as employees] is definitely a tenet.

And you should also have a written contract. There are people at a very high level in the dance world who work on a handshake agreement, who don't ever have anything written down. Having a contract is an essential part of having a job—the contract is the container for you to lay out what you need to have a safe, sustainable, and equitable workplace.

EC: DANC really centers dancers, which seems important. The whole dance field relies so heavily on dancers' labor, even though we have typically been pretty disempowered.

MW: There are certain training tracks in this country (though not all) that prioritize a sort of muteness on the part of dancers. And

dancers tend to be a younger workforce. We work from the same scarcity model that everybody else in the field works for. We acutely feel our precarity and our replaceability, and all of that makes us less willing to collectively organize. Everybody feels like they're going to be fired all the time. You are told that your dance job is a precious gift that you must cherish above all else, that you should never do anything that will threaten it, and collective organizing threatens it.

But one of the principles of collective organizing is that you even out the power that different employees have. You spread out the sway held by people who have more experience organizing, or who are in a less financially precarious position, or who are more senior employees—those people work shoulder to shoulder with the more vulnerable people in the room. You create a space for everybody to come forward and to articulate their concerns. This gets rid of some of the individualism that characterizes both participating in American capitalism but also participating in a competitive artistic field.

I'm hoping there's something that can come out of this. We've seen that on a broader cultural level, right? Neighbors are looking out for one another, mutual aid organizations are working double-time, and [relief funds](#) that directly support the most vulnerable folks in our field and community have cropped up across the country. I'm hoping this translates into people understanding collective action as a legitimate way to get what they need.

EC: You mentioned the feeling of scarcity and replaceability among dancers. It seems that the only way around this will be getting a truly mass buy-in to these ideas—there will always be someone willing to work for less unless everyone (or nearly everyone) in the field has agreed to refuse these conditions. Do you have any insight for people who might be skeptical of the idea of a freelance dancer's union, or for people who might be unfamiliar with the principles of collective organizing?

MW: When you look at a more traditional union like AGMA [[American Guild of Musical Artists](#)], there's a lot in the contracts about hazard pay and heavy carry pay and whether or not you get shoes and overtime. For many of us, who have never worked at a large, unionized company, these expectations feel completely pie-in-the-sky. Some people are resistant to unions when this is the only model that has been presented to them. If you feel like that's out of reach to begin with, why would you even be interested in collective organizing?

But the core of what DANC advocates for is: transparency and communication with employers; the right for dancers to talk to one another about their working conditions; for dancers to have a clear channel through which they can report issues of safety and equity in the workplace; and for dancers to have more knowledge about the standard rates, benefits, and conditions in the field. None of these things are about making unrealistic demands on employers, but we've been working "in the dark" for so long that it can seem like a huge ask just to shed some light.

So that fear of being overly demanding also holds people back. But we just had a great conversation with Clarissa Soto Josephs [Associate Director of [Pentacle](#)] who said that when you ask for a clear, written, and fairly negotiated contract, you are doing a favor to the person who is employing you. Understanding dance work as real work benefits everyone in the field.

Unions are also an unfamiliar cultural object right now. Union participation has steadily declined since the Reagan era, and in 2018 was [down to 10.5%](#). I think what understanding does exist of unions is colored by the presence of racism and tribalism in some facets of union organizing.

So DANC needs to make organizing accessible, uphold the folks who have come before us who have explicitly linked worker organizing with social justice — the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Dolores Huerta & Cesar Chavez, Mother Jones, Grace Lee Boggs, the list is long — and extend a considerate and broad invitation to our entire community to participate in this work.

Collective organizing is a tool of the working class. As artists we hesitate to undo our own elitism in order to situate ourselves alongside our fellow workers. But it has to happen.

EC: How can people get involved with DANC?

MW: People can join DANC by signing our [solidarity statement](#), and they can find out more by visiting our [website](#) and [Instagram](#). Our community response meetings are held every Monday at 1pm on Zoom. We are also leading a [virtual town hall](#), hosted by Gibney, on May 26.

Interview with Megan Wright by Emma Cohen, conducted via Zoom, April 23.

*By signing DANC's solidarity statement, Emma Cohen is considered to be a member of DANC

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