

Radio and TV actors strike US advertisers

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Tens of thousands of actors who perform in television and radio commercials walked out on strike Monday, May 1 against advertisers' demands to pay actors a flat fee for ads instead of residual compensation when commercials run on network TV. The 135,000 actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), are also demanding a larger cut from the booming cable market, which airs two-thirds of all TV commercials.

Picket lines went up in front of advertising agencies in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and San Francisco in the first major Hollywood strike since the 22-week walkout by the Writers Guild of America in 1988. Thousands of actors and their supporters rallied in these cities, holding up signs saying, "Advertising Pays, Advertisers Don't" and chanting, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, corporate greed has got to go!" In New York and Los Angeles several well-known actors expressed solidarity with the strikers, including Elliott Gould, Richard Dreyfuss, Jerry Orbach, William Baldwin, Jerry Stiller and Tony Roberts.

Unlike celebrities who earn six- and seven-digit salaries for commercial spots, lesser-known actors get a minimum of about \$478 for a day's work, plus "pay-per-play" residuals of roughly \$50 to \$120 each time a spot airs on network television. These commercials, known as "A spots," are the most crucial source of income for many actors.

The average annual income of a SAG member is between \$5,000 and \$7,000 and the majority of commercial actors are forced to work other jobs, including temping, waiting tables, driving taxis and bartending, to make ends meet.

When it comes to cable TV commercials, performers receive only a flat fee of \$1,000 or less for each 13-week, unlimited run. A flat fee is also paid for regional, non-network TV ads, and for so-called wild

spots, commercials that air infrequently in selected time slots. Advertisers also pay less than \$1,000 for ads on the Internet, where they run 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Moreover, once an actor does an ad, he or she cannot do a commercial for a similar product for 13 weeks.

The unions have called for residual payments to be extended to cable television and for a 14 percent raise for network and cable ads. They are also seeking a new pay structure for the emerging Internet market.

The advertisers are determined to eliminate the pay-per-play structure that has been in place for nearly 50 years. They want to extend the flat fees from cable to network TV, paying actors \$2,575 for unlimited airings of an ad during a 13-week period.

"The industry's position is that we're taking a contract geared to the 1950s and modernizing it to fit modern day television," said Ira Sheppard, labor counsel for the Association of National Advertisers and the American Association of Advertising Agencies, which represent 250 agencies and 150 large advertisers. Residual payments made sense, Sheppard said, when the networks attracted 95 percent of the audience, but not now with hundreds of cable channels drawing more than 50 percent of viewers.

The ad agencies, backed by the media conglomerates that own the networks, cable channels and movie companies, want to remove all obstacles to the exploitation of a cheap, flexible labor force. This was made clear in a May 2 column in the *Wall Street Journal* by Collin Levey, which all but called for the smashing of the actors unions. "Nominally, the battle is over residuals, the stream of payments commercial actors receive over the life of an ad campaign. The real question, though, is whether SAG is a doomed vestige of a provincial, guild-oriented pre-electronic Hollywood that no longer exists."

Levey urged advertisers to press ahead with their

plans to produce commercials with nonunion actors and those who cross the picket lines, saying, “Nowadays off-Broadway theaters, student films, independent productions, local TV commercials and local cable outlets give actors a chance to build careers without ever encountering a SAG membership form. These are the people who might find an unusual number of opportunities opening up in the coming months.”

The strike follows the vote last fall by SAG members to throw out incumbent President Richard Masur, who had pledged to help SAG make the “transition from a reactive to a service-oriented organization.” For years the union had accepted the erosion of actors' living standards and working conditions, while the studios, networks and cable companies made tens of billions in profits.

Striking actors and their supporters who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed their determination to oppose the advertisers' union-busting plans. One striking actor in Los Angeles told the *WSWS*, “The pickets are militant and vociferous. We voted by a 98 percent margin to strike. The advertisers are making huge profits and we are enormously exploited.

“I'm in the top 10 percent of income earners in the union, and I only bring home \$24,000 a year before taxes. Most actors make less than \$10,000 a year. You cannot even qualify for health and welfare benefits unless you earn \$15,000. Out of these earnings you have to pay 10 percent to your agent, plus the cost of demo tapes, pictures, make-up, gas and wear and tear on your car. All of that comes out of your pocket.

“The vast majority of actors do commercials, plus feature films and episodic TV. But it's difficult to get into features, so we rely on commercials. It's our bread and butter. Even then you might get one or two ads out of 100 auditions.

“Every actor is not a star and we have to work anywhere we can to pay the bills. Sometimes you lose an outside job because you have to make an audition. It is a tough existence.

“For all the talk about liberal Hollywood there is a real class system here. The extras are treated like garbage. They have even begun using computer-generated images to replace extras and movie sets, putting a lot of workers onto the unemployment line. I think the big companies are concerned that our strike may spread to feature film and TV actors and writers

too.”

A Hollywood agent who sympathizes with the strikers told the *WSWS*, “These advertising agencies are making a bundle. Just look at the millions being spent on 15- and 30-second ads during the Super Bowl or the Academy Awards.

“The advertisers are just showing their arrogance. Whenever there is a strike like this it is because someone wants to make a whole lot more money. The actors, who have long felt the union was not really behind them, now feel they have to stand up.”



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