

US advertiser publishes provocative ad against striking actors

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A provocative magazine advertisement has added new fuel to the fire in the three-week-old strike by 135,000 actors against the advertising industry. The advertising agency RSA USA ran an ad in the weekly trade publication *Shoot* which pictured an elderly African woman's wrinkled breasts and was captioned "In South Africa, this what SAG means," SAG being a crude pun on the acronym for the Screen Actors Guild, one of the two unions involved in the strike.

"We believe it's one of the most racist, sexist and misogynistic ads we've ever seen," countered Anne-Marie Johnson, who heads the equal employment opportunity committee for SAG and the Association of Radio and Television Artists (AFTRA). Johnson, who also appears on the television series "JAG," added, "To visually victimize women and specifically people of color goes beyond the pale. We are just in shock."

The presidents of the two striking unions, SAG and AFTRA, issued an open letter to the advertising clients of RSA calling for them to dissociate from the company and what they termed "the racist, sexist and union-busting principles of an ad so repugnant on so many different levels that it simply boggles the mind."

Initially, RSA spokespeople parried criticisms in defending the ad. Marcus Nispel of RSA, one of the most sought after commercial directors in the industry who is referred to in the ad, responded that he got "loads of messages from people who got a good chuckle about the ad."

But the following day the ad agency submitted an apology. RSA owner-brothers Tony Scott, who directed the film *Top Gun*, and Ridley Scott, director of this year's *Gladiator*, said in their statement, "RSA USA made a huge mistake. Our intent was not to offend people of color, women or anyone else by the use of our advertisement in the recent edition of *Shoot*. For

that we are truly and deeply sorry."

Many people were justifiably outraged by the offensive ad in *Shoot*. But it was more than just an ignorant barb aimed at striking actors. Linda Ross, RSA's managing director, said concerning the ad and the related strike by actors, "There is a lot of business at stake here." She indicated that the ad's substance had drawn positive response from the rest of the industry.

The ad said in part, "To service clients, Marcus Nispel is setting up a temporary office in South Africa, where production is cost effective and they've never heard of SAG." Nispel told *Variety* magazine that the insulting aspect of the ad was meant to draw attention to the fact that Hollywood is losing production to other countries where labor and production costs are lower. "I wanted to make it clear that we can produce in other countries as well as we can here," he emphasized.

Striking actors in advertising are fighting to defend a 50-year-old pay structure that guarantees residual payments to a performer each time an ad runs on commercial television. The advertisers want to eliminate residuals and pay a flat fee of about \$2,575 for 13 weeks of network use—similar to the current system used for cable television. The actors want residuals extended to cable television and Internet ads as well.

With the advertisers showing no signs of retreating from their union-busting demands, the walkout is not expected to end soon. Discussions are being held with mediators, but no formal negotiation sessions are scheduled.

Advertisers spent months preparing for the strike. David Perry, the director of broadcast production for Saatchi & Saatchi, an advertising agency whose clients include Procter & Gamble, General Mills and Johnson & Johnson, said industry officials began stockpiling

names and photos of nonunion actors six months ago. Matt Miller, the president of the Association of Independent Commercial Producers, confirmed that a number of companies are making their commercials overseas.

For their part, the leaderships of SAG and AFTRA have offered no viable strategy to win the strike. Instead they have sought to assure their members that advertisers will give in because they will be unhappy with the quality of commercials made with nonunion actors.

From the beginning of the strike the spokesmen for big business, such as the editorial page writers from the *Wall Street Journal*, have all but called for the destruction of the actors unions. Behind the advertisers stand the media conglomerates and their large shareholders who want to eliminate all obstacles to profit-making.

Just as in other industries, the advertising agencies are seeking to utilize the global economy to take advantage of cheap labor conditions, posing the need for US actors to unite with their counterparts internationally, and reject the AFL-CIO's "American-first" nationalism.



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