

Advertising producers moving production out of strikebound Hollywood

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Reuters News Service, basing itself upon notes taken at a closed-door meeting of the Association of National Advertisers, reports that ad agencies are abandoning attempts to shoot ads in Hollywood and its environs, one of the main centers of a strike by unionized commercial actors.

Among the warnings issued at the meeting was that producers should “stay away from Hollywood” due to the persistent and militant picketing by striking members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). “Shooting is too difficult, and too many actors can get there easily.”

By using an Internet site and phone banks, union members, upon learning of the location of a shooting set for a commercial, have been able to quickly mobilize pickets. In some cases producers report that they have had nonunion actors defect to the picketers at production sites. Such incidents, combined with the need to recruit new actors, are causing some cost overruns. The producers are retaliating by shooting on private property in order to shield cast and crew members from pickets. Producers are also disguising actors as crew members, hiring extra security and preparing so-called exit plans for each day's shootings.

In addition, Matt Miller, president of the Association of Independent Commercial Producers, while insisting that set shootings continue in Los Angeles, admits that production teams are moving to the suburbs, out-of-state sites and locations in other countries. According to Miller the bookings for international locations by commercial producers, in anticipation of May's work stoppage, increased by 60 percent during the month of April.

Earlier this month, controversy surrounded the publication, by the ad agency RSA USA, of a bigoted

and anti-union advertisement that advocated moving commercial productions to South Africa. The revelations by Reuters indicate that the previous week's convulsions were not mere verbal bellicosity. In an effort to wear down striking actors, the advertisers are determined to exploit global markets for producing commercials. At the same time, John McGuinn, who heads negotiations for the advertisers, indicated that the industry was not seeking to “break the union” but is instead looking for “an exit strategy,” that is, that SAG and AFTRA agree to terms acceptable to the industry. Asked when negotiations with the unions would resume he replied, “It's hard to do in the first couple of weeks because people need time to cool down.”

SAG and AFTRA are seeking to retain the residual payment structure for commercial television that pays actors each time an ad is run, while extending this formula to cable and the Internet. The advertising industry wants to maintain the highly profitable flat fee structure now existent on cable and the Internet while rolling back the 50-year-old residual formula for commercial television.

The actors' unions, like the rest of the AFL-CIO, have no strategy to counter the move into global markets by the advertisers. Outside of its own membership, it has limited its appeals for solidarity to high-profile actors and sports figures who are widely featured in commercials. It has focused much attention on seeking to obtain support from corporate clients of ad production agencies, asking them to forgo making ads with companies employing nonunion actors during the strike.

Last week the unions lobbied an AT&T shareholders' meeting in Chicago to urge company executives to refrain from shooting commercials with nonunion actors and to sign an interim agreement accepting the

unions' demands.

In another incident, SAG and AFTRA appealed to former General Colin Powell, who chairs the foundation America's Promise, not to shoot a public service announcement for the organization. SAG President William Daniels sent a letter to Powell in which he addressed the former head of the Joint Chiefs who spearheaded Operation Desert Storm against Iraq as “a man of great integrity, who is a role model for so many Americans.” Powell personally crossed union picket lines to appear in the ad for America's Promise.



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