

Actors' unions strike in the US approaches two-month mark

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The walkout by 135,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) against US advertisers is reaching its two month mark, in the wake of the recent failed attempt to reopen contract talks.

The ad industry is determined to roll back a long-time formula that provides residuals to actors every time an ad is aired on commercial television and instead substitute a flat-rate fee in its place. SAG and AFTRA are seeking to fend off the industry's attack on commercial television while extending similar "pay per play" formulas to cable television and the Internet where flat fees presently exist. The advertisers have used nonunion actors and celebrities to continue shooting commercials.

The union, as a result of militant picketing by strikers, has found some success in shutting down traditional shooting locations in Los Angeles and New York. In LA off-lot commercials fell 67 percent during the first 16 days of June compared to figures of one year ago. But the ad industry has gone outside the traditional strongholds in search nonunion actors both within the US and internationally.

In Canada, the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA) has called on its members to continue to refuse work on American commercials affected by the strike by its sister unions in the US. The renewed pledge was issued despite a recent ruling by a Canadian arbitrator which allows producers in Canada to pay the lower rates of the old collective agreement between ACTRA and advertising producers rather than those provided by the interim SAG/AFTRA contract.

The WSWWS spoke with SAG/AFTRA members at union headquarters in Hollywood. Gary Mosher has been a member of SAG and AFTRA for six years. "I

totally believe we should have meaningful talks with the advertisers, but they don't want to talk about our rights. We gave cable a break back then because it was just beginning. Now it's a multibillion-dollar business, and they don't want to acknowledge that.

"Pretty soon there will only be two kinds of people in this business: the big stars and then the background people. We won't be able to afford a decent lifestyle. Right now, I'm personally not really that affected because I work more theatrically. The strike hasn't had a direct impact on theatrical contracts yet. But the same people we're dealing with now in advertising are also a big part of the theater. For example, Seagram's does a lot of commercials. They're also a big part of theater. That's why it's important that we win this strike."

Curtis Taylor has 20 years in the industry. "I've gone from three to four interviews to zero at the moment. The advertisers just want to pay a flat fee to the actors. We want to be paid per play. The advertising companies are not negotiating in good faith. With their revenues from commercials, they are making record profits. And cable is so much of a medium nowadays. It's almost as though they've overtaken the networks.

"Last year we did a test of 35 commercials and found out we were being cheated out of about \$100,000. The advertising companies are trying to break our union. We realize if we don't win this strike, it'll devastate our union. This is our livelihood. It's going to be a long strike, but I'm willing to sacrifice a summer and even the fall season if we can succeed in gaining a decent standard of living."

Mari Weiss has been a member of SAG for 11 years. "About 15 to 20 years ago when cable was just starting, the actors were patient and gave them a break. Then came the Internet. AOL merged with Time-Warner. Cable is growing so fast, and it's changing constantly.

“Thirty years ago they fought to get residuals. Now there is the exclusivity clause, which says if you do a commercial for Ford Motor Co., you cannot be hired by GM or any other car company. Your voice or your face has become associated with that company, and you can't be hired to work elsewhere. But then the commercial gets run thousands and thousands of times. They should be paying to use our faces and voices.

“Cable and the Internet have totally changed everything. Everybody can see how it's impacting everything, but then they say it has nothing to do with us. And this is misleading to the general public.

“We're more like janitors than movie stars. For one commercial I make, I go through 60 auditions. We work very, very hard. We hustle to get that one spot. It's not just that commercial we do, we also go through three hours of auditions. We pay for our own photographs for our portfolios, and then for the hours and hours we need to be just available. They may call you between 10:00 a.m. and noon to be available at 4:00. We have to be on call. We need to be compensated for that.”

Dennis Tracy has been a member of SAG and AFTRA for 19 years. He and Jarod Donahue, a future member who had been picketing Grey Advertising in Hollywood, were at the union headquarters. Dennis said, “There was a notice about a picket line with 50 pickets. Only two were actual SAG members. The rest were like Jarod, who are new to the field and union. Bless those nonunion people who are supporting us.

“It's totally terrifying that these producers have the power to lower an entire section of the population economically. They are destroying pensions, welfare and whole families.”

Jarod said, “I'm doing this for my future as an actor. I'd like to be able to raise a family from being an actor, not as an actor and then a waiter.”



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