

# Mediated talks in US commercial actors strike collapse

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Talks sponsored by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service between unions representing 130,000 striking commercial actors and negotiators for the ad industry in the US collapsed at the end of the first day. Federal mediators were unable to find grounds for resuming serious negotiations aimed at ending the two-month old strike. Neither side gave ground on the major issue of compensation for actors who perform in ads for commercial television and cable.

The Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Actors (AFTRA) are seeking to defend a longtime formula for commercial television that pays them each time an ad is aired. The advertising agencies want to end residual payments and institute a flat fee that provides one-time payment for the shooting of a commercial.

Negotiations were preceded by rallies in both New York and Los Angeles that not only brought out strikers but a considerable number of film and entertainment actors who called for solidarity with their striking counterparts. Many are concerned that the onslaught against the commercial actors only foreshadows similar demands by the corporations that will be leveled against film and television actors when contracts come due in July of 2001.

However SAG President William Daniels announced that he will seek support from CEOs at various Fortune 500 companies and ask them to sign interim agreements with the union to shoot commercials on the basis of the union's contract demands. Daniel's emphasized that SAG's demands will not overly affect their bottom lines.

"I'm asking the CEOs of Ford, Coca-Cola, GE and Anheuser-Busch, 'Do you know what's going on here?' The talent portion of the budget is less than 2 percent of

the budget to put a commercial on the air," said Daniels. "And even if the advertisers accepted all of our proposals, it would still be less than 2 percent."

The attempt by SAG and AFTRA to get interim agreements has undermined the strike. Many small advertisers have signed on to the agreements and then served as proxies for the Fortune 500 companies.

Ira Sheppard, chief negotiator for the advertising agencies, is far from perplexed by the fact that some 36 major corporations are shooting an occasional local and regional spot with front companies. "The vast, vast, vast majority of commercials that have been produced since the strike began have been done with nonunion talent," he said.

"If my clients can produce 90-95 percent of their commercials nonunion and, on occasion, go to a small production company to produce one or two commercials with union actors, the union is far worse off than we are," Sheppard told a reporter for the *Hollywood Reporter*. "If we can continue doing it this way, there's never any reason to have an agreement. If I was SAG and AFTRA, I'd be much more concerned about this development than the industry should be."

There are signs that many striking actors are dismayed with the policy of the union leaders and their failure to bring the ad industry to the bargaining table and conclude an agreement. In one case a group of strikers began planning a civil disobedience protest at a McDonald's in the Studio City area of Los Angeles, but the union officials squashed the effort. A striker speaking to the *Hollywood Reporter* stated, "When the strike committee got wind of it, they put the kibosh on it. It had never gone through the committee, they said."

Meanwhile, the first arrest and injury to striking pickets took place on June 28 when SAG strikers followed an agency to Oregon where a commercial

shoot for a Chevy truck was taking place. Police arrested Mary McDonald-Lewis for attempting to disrupt the shoot by waving her picket sign in front of cameras. Michael Brennan, another striker who was picketing the action while riding an all-terrain vehicle, stopped when McDonald-Lewis was arrested and then had another Chevy truck slam into him. Brennan suffered several broken ribs and a bruised liver.



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