

The need for socialist politics in the film and television industry

Screen Actors Guild negotiations continue in secret on eve of contract expiration

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As the July 1 expiration date for the contract of 120,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) looms, union leaders continue to negotiate in secret with the American Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). Many television and film productions have shut down over fears of an actors' walk-out. However, SAG leaders have not yet even asked their members for strike authorization.

A media blackout on the negotiations is in effect. SAG's web site has carried versions of the following brief announcement over the past several days:

"Los Angeles, June 28, 2008—The Screen Actors Guild national negotiating committee met with the employers at the AMPTP headquarters in Sherman Oaks [California] today. We have concluded for the day and will resume on Sunday. We have no further comment."

There is no reason to have any confidence in such a process and, in fact, every likelihood that SAG members, like members of the Directors Guild (DGA), Writers Guild (WGA) and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) before them, will be presented with a rotten compromise that satisfies none of their underlying needs.

SAG leaders have criticized AFTRA's recent capitulation to the AMPTP and argue that they are willing to hold out for something better. AFTRA, which is smaller than SAG, but shares with it approximately 44,000 members, recently agreed to a contract essentially on the terms set by the conglomerates. The latter, massive media transnationals, are determined to cut costs and earn billions in new media at the expense of writers, directors and other industry workers.

AFTRA and SAG had negotiated jointly with the employers for the past 27 years, but recently—and acrimoniously—parted ways before contract talks began. In its desire to nestle closer to the AMPTP, AFTRA leaders created a red herring, accusing SAG of meddling with the jurisdictional representation of daytime television performers. On its own, AFTRA promptly reached a deal with the studios and networks.

AFTRA's move, which served the purposes of the companies, has put immense pressure on the SAG leadership to capitulate and accept terms and conditions modeled on the sell-

out contracts recently accepted by the WGA after a three-month strike, as well as the Directors' Guild, which settled before the writers without so much as a protest.

SAG leaders, despite their current language, have a perspective that is not one whit superior to that of the other union leaderships in the industry, and when push comes to shove, will reach a similar deal as the WGA, DGA and AFTRA.

This past week, AFTRA sent out a copy of the contract claiming to summarize its most salient points and urging union members to ratify it. Members must return ballots by July 8, and ratification or non-ratification of the contract by its members will be announced shortly thereafter. Industry publications suggest that SAG leaders will wait till the ratification results are in before deciding whether to hold a strike authorization vote or not.

AFTRA leaders have waged a furious campaign over the past few weeks, sending no fewer than eight email messages to its members from June 16 to June 26 in defense of the contract.

In one of those letters, national Executive Director Kim Roberts Hedgpeth states: "On its merits, the new contract increases minimums for every category of performer by 3.5 percent, 3.0 percent, and 3.5 percent—over 10 percent compounded over three years." However, the consumer price index is now increasing at more than 4 percent a year, so such a contract would represent a decline in real wages.

These increases, Hedgpeth asserts, "exceed those negotiated by the WGA following a 100-day strike—the WGA base rates for network primetime television were increased by 3.0 percent per year." This is more of a comment on the character of the writers' contract than one in favor of the AFTRA deal.

According to SAG leaders, the AFTRA contract failed to win adequate compensation in "the major role minimum," with an increase of only 4 percent.

Furthermore, AFTRA has agreed to give many company signatories to AMPTP the freedom "to produce programs for new media using all non-union actors." Union membership in these web-based programs would only apply to already existing shows; in other words, to shows that are derivative. And

mandatory union membership would take place only for programs above a certain budget threshold.

This is opening the door to low-cost production, precisely what the studios and networks are seeking. Hundred of shows that cost less than \$15,000 per minute would, in effect, be performed by non-union actors.

Management has also refused to pay any residuals for “original new media programs”—one of the main issues facing the writers and a catalyst for their strike this past winter.

AFTRA’s short statement in the summary of its own contract simply says that “If either DGA or SAG desires to continue the Residual Study, Industry will invite AFTRA to participate.”

However, this kind of a “study” is a fraud, nothing more than a stalling tactic by the AMPTP, which ended up paying the writers very little, if any, on DVD residuals.

In addition, the AFTRA contract provides the producers with a huge bonanza, since any television program produced after July 1, 2008, “may be streamed [over the Internet] on a free consumer, ad-supported web site for 17 consecutive days surrounding the original broadcast (24 days for programs in their first season or one-time programs) before residuals are triggered”—i.e., before actors receive any residual payments.

According to SAG Board member Justine Bateman, in a column that recently appeared on the United Hollywood web site:

“The 17-day (sometimes 24-day) exhibition window must go away. This is the corporations’ ability to play your work on-line for free, eliminating your ability to reap residual checks. There should be NO window. You play it, you pay it. Last I checked, the advertisers had to pay for EVERY airing, not just for those after the first 17 days. As far as Film goes, movies will be pulled off a large server on the internet soon (as they are already being done in one particular chain of theaters) and projected onto the screen. How would you like the contract language to be twisted so that if you have points on a film, they DO NOT make it applicable until AFTER the first two and a half weeks? Wow, that would be a lot of money to not have if you’ve got a hit film.”

Another sore point in the SAG-AMPTP negotiations has been the use of product placement in television shows, with lines added to the actors’ characters to make specific reference to those products in what amounts “to unpaid commercials integrated into scripted programs.” This would in effect cause thousands of commercial actors to lose their jobs, aside from degrading further television fare. AFTRA’s contract does not address this issue.

AFTRA leaders, in response to SAG’s criticisms, have launched a semi-hysterical effort in defense of their rotten contract, making statements that verge on a smear campaign, echoing the studios and networks.

In an email sent to members June 25, for example, AFTRA leaders write:

“It’s not about politics—IT’S ABOUT YOUR PAYCHECK.

“Don’t be SUCKERED into a STRIKE.

“AFTRA members have been subjected to an unprecedented attack from a group within our sister union. AFTRA’s 70,000 members have been targeted by a politically-motivated disinformation campaign, financed with the dues money of SAG members, based on a decision made by 13 members within the Guild’s leadership....

“The recent writers’ strike cost entertainment-industry workers \$2.3 billion and led to the loss of nearly 40,000 jobs. Most of us have still not completely recovered from that struggle and are concerned about the national economy heading into a recession. *Now is NOT the time to play politics with people’s livelihoods. It’s time to put more money in your paycheck.*”

These attacks, which hint at “left”-bashing, are a sure sign that AFTRA leaders are attempting to engineer a sell-out. In fact, the “politics” of both union leaderships are fundamentally the same: acceptance of the stranglehold over media and entertainment of the giant transnationals and the profit system as a whole, along with support for the Democratic Party.

None of the problems confronting actors, writers and others can be addressed without the emergence of different, far broader ideas and politics in the film and television industry: a socialist rejection of the monopoly of a handful of massive corporations over the media and their transformation into public utilities under the democratic control of those who work for them.

If the profit interests of General Electric, News Corp., Time Warner, Viacom and the rest prevail, the overwhelming majority of actors, writers and crew members will see a continuing decline in their living standards and working conditions, as well as the further deterioration of mass-based entertainment beyond its currently low levels.



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