

Conglomerates present Screen Actors Guild with their “final” offer

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US entertainment conglomerates organized in the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) made their “final offer” to the Screen Actors Guild on Monday, only hours before the expiration of the present contract at midnight. SAG has not asked its 120,000 members nationwide to authorize a strike.

In a message posted on its web site, SAG told its members that “work will continue and all SAG members should report to work and to audition for new work past the expiration date until further notice from the Guild.”

The AMPTP issued a statement asserting “Our final offer to SAG represents a final hope for avoiding further work stoppages and getting everyone back to work.” Members of the Alliance include Time Warner, Disney, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., General Electric’s NBC Universal, Viacom, CBS, Sony and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, among others.

SAG leaders have criticized a tentative agreement recently reached between the employers and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), and actively campaigned against its acceptance. AFTRA has some 70,000 members; 44,000 performers are members of both unions.

In a message to their membership, SAG leaders commented that “The AMPTP today delivered a last-minute, 43-page offer that upon initial examination appears to be generally consistent with the AFTRA deal.”

In an initial response, SAG executive director and chief negotiator Doug Allen commented: “This offer does not appear to address some key issues important to actors. For example, the impact of forgoing residuals for all made-for-new-media productions is incalculable and would mean the beginning of the end of residuals.”

AMPTP and SAG representatives were scheduled to meet Wednesday. The conglomerates arrogantly announced that they would answer questions on their “final” proposal, but would not entertain any counter-proposals.

The SAG leadership has made it clear that it will not hold a strike authorization vote until the results of the AFTRA membership ratification are known July 8.

According to the studios and networks, their entire package is worth \$250 million, less than a third of the original \$900 million in gains demanded by SAG at the outset of negotiations. The deal would be broadly similar to the one ultimately accepted by the Writers Guild leadership, after a lengthy strike, which included minor concessions by the employers on new media issues, but essentially satisfied the corporate and financial elite.

The AMPTP is resisting SAG demands for a higher share of DVD residuals—actors currently receive a pittance from the sale of DVDs—and residuals for made-for-Internet programming, on neither of which AFTRA made any ground. SAG has also maintained, to this point, its opposition to actors advertising products that are scripted into television shows. The proposed AFTRA deal gives actors less control over the use of film and television clips online.

A handful of performers in film and television command enormous paychecks, while tens of thousands work for very little. SAG indicates that the average annual income of its membership is \$52,000, but two-thirds earn less than \$1,000 a year from acting and fewer than 20 percent make more than \$7,500. Meanwhile the top executives of the media conglomerates make vast fortunes and live like royalty.

In line with general economic trends, the entertainment giants are determined to cut costs at the expense of the bulk of the industry’s workforce. A piece on “middle-income working actors” in the *New York Times* June 30 painted a grim picture: “Reality shows have crowded out scripted programs, comedies in particular. The studios are making fewer movies, and the ones they are making are less actor-driven. [Two of the current box office top ten are animated films; most of the others are simply ‘cartoonish.’] Networks like NBC have virtually stopped filming pilot episodes, meaning they are hiring fewer actors. Voice-over work, once a staple for less-known actors, is outsourced to other countries or given to A-list stars.”

On Monday evening, AFTRA held a membership meeting at its Los Angeles headquarters. The meeting, organized to

discuss the terms of the contract, was advertised among the 25,000 AFTRA members in Southern California, but only about 50 people showed up, a good many of them associated with the negotiations. The low turnout was itself a vote of no confidence.

Union president Roberta Reardon quipped that she could see about seven people in the audience whom she had called personally.

Most of the meeting was taken up by an exhaustive, and self-congratulatory, explanation of the contract the union's leadership has urged its members to approve. Although at first the affair had the chumminess of a cocktail party, the realities facing AFTRA's membership could not be kept out of the meeting forever. One actor demanded to know why SAG and AFTRA had split over the current negotiations. The answers focused on demonizing the SAG leadership, especially its president, Alan Rosenberg.

Some life was breathed into the discussion when an actress pointed out how little she made from residuals, even after having guest-starred on a few television shows. Most pointedly, she remarked that the present struggle was much more than about these small issues and that it was, in fact, about "who's going to control the industry."

One of the board members quickly pointed out that her "passion" was deeply appreciated, but that things had to move on.

A supporter of the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWs, and a longtime AFTRA member, then pointed out that the salary gains of which the board was so proud were really a wage cut when the rate of inflation was taken into account.

He added, "I for one applaud the anger and passion this actress has shown us. The fact is that she has asked the most fundamental question in a period in which the conglomerates are determined to drive back our living conditions to a situation worse than the '30s. The fact is that either we as artists confront the basic issue [this actress] has raised or we go back in time. Who will control this industry—the artists, writers, directors and other craft unions for the benefit of all, or the few billionaires who only care about their wealth?"

Upon these remarks, the speaker received a chorus of approval from a section of the few rank-and-file members who had shown up.

The actor pointed out the lessons of the writers strike and how union after union struggle had ended in defeat because the leaders accept the parameters established by the owners and therefore go into negotiations with both hands tied behind their backs, "betraying time and again the aspirations of working people all over the world. We must fight back in a new way ... The conglomerates are out for blood; let's not kid ourselves about it.

"You have told us in a few e-mails that we should stay

away from 'politics,' but this fight, as for SAG members and the writers, is political."

At this point union president Reardon took the microphone, interrupted the speaker, and indicated that the meeting was not a place to discuss politics. She said that if the speaker wanted to discuss politics she "would talk all [he] wanted about them, but at another time after the meeting."

Members of AFTRA should reject the deal negotiated by their union, which represents a capitulation to the studios and networks.

Beyond that, actors, writers and others in the film and television industry need to draw some sharp lessons about the entire 2007-08 cycle of contract negotiations, directly affecting the livelihood and conditions of more than 200,000 people and indirectly affecting countless others in Los Angeles, New York and elsewhere.

Whatever their verbal and tactical differences, the union leaderships involved—Writers Guild, Directors Guild, AFTRA and SAG—have proven entirely incapable of defending or advancing the economic or artistic interests of their memberships. At the end of the day, in each round of negotiations, the giant companies have come away the victor and, as everyone knows, the living standards and conditions for the overwhelming majority of workers in the industry will continue to deteriorate.

When AFTRA leaders denounce "politics," they mean politics that question or reject the status quo. They, and the rest of the industry union leaderships, *have* politics: the acceptance of the profit system and support for the Democratic Party.

However, the present stranglehold of a handful of giant conglomerates over media and entertainment in the US, defended by both the Republicans and Democrats, is incompatible with decent working and intellectual conditions for film and television industry workers. There is no shortcut around this great social problem.

The way out of the present impasse leads through the growing influence of socialist ideas and politics among actors, writers, directors and crew members. The struggle of film and television workers can only be taken forward as part of a broader, social movement of the working population against the corporate and financial oligarchy. A break with the Democrats and the adoption of an openly anti-capitalist program is the precondition for such a movement.



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