

Screen Actors meeting in Los Angeles: still no way forward

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On July 19 about 700 actors from the Hollywood division of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) packed the Empire Room of the Sportsmen's Lodge in Studio City. The meeting was called by the guild's leadership in celebration of SAG's 75th anniversary. The Hollywood branch has approximately 72,000 members, or about 60 percent of the national membership.

The meeting took place only a few miles from the Encino branch of IndyMac, where just days before—in a scene out of the Depression years—hundreds of people had stood in line for hours trying to rescue their life savings from the bank's collapse and takeover by the federal government.

An air of unreality permeated the SAG proceedings at first. The topic of the contract negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), in which the living standards and working conditions of thousands of actors are at stake, seemed to be almost an afterthought. Remarkably, it was placed eighth in an agenda that included a self-congratulatory 75th Anniversary DVD and slide show, and the Ralph Morgan Award to veteran actor and union activist Yale Summers.

The meeting took place under tense and complex conditions. The current round of negotiations with writers, directors and performers in the entertainment industry, centered in Southern California, began a year ago. The writers, members of the Writers Guild, struck for more than three months last winter, and the leadership ended up reaching a rotten compromise, which failed to win increases on residuals from the sales of DVDs and included minimal gains for material on new media. The Directors Guild and American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (AFTRA) leaderships reached agreements along the same lines. Essentially, the entertainment conglomerates have gotten what they wanted, with minor exceptions.

The studios and networks are insisting that SAG sign the same sort of deal, but the guild leadership has held out to this point over the issue of new media in particular. In a statement sent out July 17, SAG national executive director Doug Allen insisted that the actors' union must get a better deal than the writers and directors.

"The DGA and WGA represent writers and directors, not actors," Allen wrote. "Their resolution of the new-media issues may work for them, but they don't address your specific needs. The DGA and WGA agreed to allow producers to make new-media productions entirely nonunion, at the producers' option, for projects below budgets of \$15,000 per minute (effectively, almost all new-media productions for the foreseeable future)."

Allen continued: "Some of you may be wondering why we don't just agree to the template established by the other unions. The template doesn't protect actors, and while we may be the last union to

come to the table, we still have the obligation to address the issues that are most important to you. We have had the extra time to effectively assess the impact of rapid technological and marketplace changes, and after careful analysis, we don't believe the template works for SAG members."

The message, sent to SAG members, came a day after another meeting between the guild and the employers made no headway.

SAG leaders are currently conducting a policy of "No peace, no war" (i.e., no settlement, but no strike), which is untenable in the long run. Since they refuse to make preparations for an all-out industrial and political struggle, which is what a strike would involve, there is no reason for the studios and networks to budge. The latter are prepared to call the guild leaders' bluff.

The giant conglomerates insist that if SAG members don't ratify the contract by August 15, they will not receive wage increases retroactively to July 1, when the previous contract expired. The companies, whose expertise includes fear-mongering and intimidation and appeals to patriotism, claim actors will lose \$200,000 a day in increases if the August 15 ratification deadline is not met.

In response to Allen's July 17 message, the AMPTP issued a demagogic statement attacking his arguments.

"Today, SAG's chief negotiator said he could not accept AMPTP's offer because the digital media 'landscape has dramatically shifted in the six months since the DGA [Directors Guild] reached its deal. This statement is not just factually untrue; it ignores the truly seismic shifts we have all seen over the last six months in the rapidly deteriorating economy, the worsening credit crisis, and the skyrocketing price of energy. Even in the midst of these severe economic problems for our country and our industry, AMPTP has made SAG a good and fair offer, with more than \$250 million in increased compensation, groundbreaking new media rights, and pension and health protections that most Americans would envy."

The guild argues that the \$250 million figure is vastly inflated. In any event, the wage increases being offered are less than the rate of inflation, and the employers have not made any movement on the most contentious issues. These are giant companies, run by billionaires in many cases, who are issuing ultimatums to the screen actors.

The SAG leadership, however, is in no way prepared for a fight against these ruthless and predatory companies, as Saturday's meeting indicated. The union is under immense pressure from the conglomerates, the media and highly paid figures in the industry to give in to the AMPTP demands. It is presently seeking a graceful means of reaching an accommodation.

At the membership meeting, SAG President Alan Rosenberg merely

commented, “We haven’t reached a contract because of the deal with AFTRA” and there won’t be an agreement “until the [negotiating committee] recommends it to the national board and the board recommends it to the membership.”

But he immediately added, “We know we’re not going to get everything we’re working for. I told that to management at the beginning of the negotiations.” This is all meant to put SAG members to sleep.

Reality could not keep from rearing its head when the topic of the negotiations finally reached the floor Saturday afternoon, an hour and a half after the meeting began. Vice President Kent McCord, of “Adam 12” fame, opened the discussion by saying that the 75th anniversary celebration was dedicated to the “memory of those who created SAG [1933] during a time of bank failures and economic decay.”

SAG leaders hoped to confine the debate on the state of the negotiations within the narrowest possible channels. One actress managed to say that “we are at a historic state from what has been said at this meeting. That’s what I heard. Labor is under attack throughout the country. What about a strike? Are we willing to go all the way?” But following that contribution, for about 45 minutes speaker after speaker referred to personal grievances on the job or specific situations concerning internal union democracy, not the contract negotiations.

McCord later let the cat out of the bag regarding these sincere, but mundane interventions. The questions and comments from the audience, which were not to exceed three minutes, with the possibility of a one-minute extension, had been chosen from the cards that actors wishing to speak had filled out at the entrance to the meeting room. And the cards had been chosen not in the order in which they had been handed in, but, in McCord’s own words, “according to the topic.”

There was a buzz in the room when someone yelled, “Let’s talk about the contract!”

A supporter of the SEP and WSWS, a SAG member since 1978, was able to address the crowd. He first explained that he had some difficult truths to raise, “but some things must be said.”

He explained that the “bread-and-butter issues, as important as they are,” didn’t exhaust the matter. He argued that SAG members, “as well as working people all over the world, stand at a historic crossroads under the relentless attacks of the conglomerates who, under the cover of patriotism and saving the economy, have launched vicious attacks on us and the rest. I am a socialist and not afraid to admit it; and may I remind everyone here that it was socialists who built this union.”

There was a scattering of applause from certain sectors of the audience.

“There’s an economic crisis of major proportions internationally,” he continued. “And it must be resolved by the international corporations, as they see it, through restoring profitability. And that profitability will be obtained by placing the onus of the crisis on our backs through massive unemployment, destruction of working conditions, lowering of wages, etc.”

The SEP supporter explained that he supported a strike, and the formation of a rank-and-file committee to make preparations for such a struggle, against “a bunch of moguls who are determined to drive artists back to the 1930s or worse.... But let me make one thing clear: a strike cannot be carried out using the same old trade union methods. Every single strike in this country, and in country after country, has been betrayed by the union leaderships.

“Imagine: not one single victory in over 30 years, since before the PATCO strike. Not one! Why? Because our union leaders have been in bed with the owners, because they accept the parameters set by capital. And I must say that I have no confidence whatsoever in the leadership sitting on stage to come up with a winning strategy. How could I or anybody else here have any faith when so much has been done in secret; when there has been no clear perspective for winning?”

“We must assess the situation, which has changed enormously since the writers’ strike. Is just picketing the answer? Where are the writers now? Can anyone in the audience say that anything has been resolved?”

There were shouts of “No! No!”

“I mean, since the end of the strike, the housing bubble has collapsed, the subprime mortgage crisis has left hundreds of thousands homeless and the whole banking system is teetering on a precipice that’s about to swallow people’s entire life savings.

“My strategy calls for socialist policies. Right now people are angry and involved in struggle everywhere. Here in Los Angeles, longshoremen, teachers, University of California workers, nurses and janitors are all engaged in one form of labor strife or another. Those are the people we must reach out to, not depend on Democratic or Republican politicians, who are the instruments of the very same conglomerates we are fighting. The writers had the overwhelming support of the public, not just here in Los Angeles but throughout the country. We can and must reach out to them and shut the city down if necessary.

“The writers, as hard as they fought, as militantly as they fought, got a rotten deal and we all know that.

“In the end, the question is posed to all of us: who will control the industry, those who profit from our labors, or those—artists, crafts people, and other industry workers—who actually do the work?”

There was applause at a number of points during these comments and sustained applause from sections of the crowd at the end. The meeting was adjourned shortly afterward and dozens of actors shook the SEP supporter’s hand.

“God, am I glad you spoke,” said one young actress. “You brought us back to reality. You said things I had been feeling for a long time but couldn’t express.”

Gary Watts commented, “[He] hit the nail right on the head. All these unions base themselves on a failed business model.

“In order to accomplish what you said, we must empower the rank and file with guidance and direction. And we should have formed a strike authorization before going into negotiations.”



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