

# US: Screen Actors Guild may organize a strike vote

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On October 1, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) negotiating committee advised the union's national board to organize a strike authorization vote. The approval of 75 percent of the members is necessary for a strike authorization. SAG leaders are attempting to use the strike vote threat as a means of getting the employers' association, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), back to the negotiating table.

SAG represents 120,000 TV and movie actors, 80 percent of whom are unemployed on any given day and 72 percent of whom earn between \$1,000 and \$4,999 a year. Among the most important issues involved in the current contract struggle are royalties, known as residuals, for the production of content on the new digital media.

A strike vote should have taken place long before the contract expired on June 30. Now, after four months of stalemate, in which the union leadership opted for a "no war, no peace" stance, the negotiating committee's statement takes on the character of a desperate posture to cover for the guild leadership's impending capitulation.

Two days before calling for the strike authorization--and following four months of actors working without a contract--SAG leaders Alan Rosenberg and Doug Allen sent a letter to the AMPTP, which included these passages:

"We have approached these contract negotiations reasonably and with a realistic and informed view of the state of the industry.

"We are prepared to meet formally and continuously until we reach agreement. We owe it to our constituencies and the thousands of others in this industry that depend on a productive, stable and uninterrupted relationship between Screen Actors Guild and the networks and studios.

"The alternative to reaching an agreement as soon as possible is unnecessary and destructive uncertainty. If your intransigence continues, however, our choices become harder and fewer. We would prefer the more complicated and productive choices that compromise will make necessary. But we can't make those choices that lead to agreement working alone.

"What do you say; when can our committees meet face-to-

face?"

These are not exactly "fighting words." In effect, the SAG leaders are begging for something, any concession from management, that they can take back to their membership, as a means of saving face when they sign an agreement.

While SAG's negotiators are fully empowered to organize a strike vote themselves, they declined to do so. Instead, they issued an "advisory opinion" for the national board to call for it. Furthermore, they are using the call as a vehicle for the "membership to express its confidence in the SAG leadership."

What's more, the negotiators' motion urges the board to "educate" actors as to the need for the authorization. It makes it clear a strike would only take place "only if the board deems it necessary and unavoidable to do so." Such a guarded and mealy-mouthed statement reveals the distance that separates the SAG negotiators and bureaucracy from the vast majority of SAG members.

SAG leaders justified their approach by referring to a recent poll of the union's members, in which 87.3 percent (10,298) voted to reject the contract the AMPTP proposed last June. Only 10 percent of the union's eligible voting members participated. The union leaders have interpreted the vote as strong support for their "no war, no peace" perspective for dealing with the studios.

SAG leaders are attempting to bluff some of the most ruthless, predatory conglomerates. The response by Nick Counter, speaking for the AMPTP, was typically dismissive:

"We do not believe that it would be productive to resume negotiations at this time given SAG's continued insistence on terms which the companies have continuously rejected."

The employers' association is not budging, and it is determined to make SAG accept the following:

\*No program for new media, such as streamlining on the Internet, that costs less than \$15,000 per minute would be covered by the contract. This would in effect open the doors to lower-paid labor.

\*No granting of residuals for programs made for new media that are re-used in new media supported by advertising, which means that the program could run forever without having to pay the actors any residuals.

\*No residuals paid to actors in programs produced before

1974; no residuals for TV stunt coordinators.

\*No compensation--in fact, no consent from the actors or notice to them--regarding product integration into scripted shows.

\*No increase in DVD residuals.

And other concessions.

The employers would like the performers to surrender any control over their art form and become mere profit-making machines for the studios.

The present Rosenberg-Allen leadership suffered something of a vote of non-confidence in the recent SAG elections. A dissident faction calling itself "Unite for Strength" (UFS) won 6 of 11 contested seats in the national board's all-important Hollywood Division. UFS, led by television actors Amy Brenneman, Kate Walsh (married to an executive at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox), Doug Savant and Adam Arkin, also captured 13 of 22 alternate seats.

The dissidents are supported by such luminaries as Tom Hanks, Alec Baldwin, Sally Field and a host of other well-heeled actors who wield considerable influence in the union. The UFS faction makes a great deal out of the bitter conflict between SAG and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), which erupted this spring. Taking advantage of the obvious failure of the Rosenberg leadership to make any headway, the dissidents demagogically call for "unity" of SAG and AFTRA and denounce the current leadership's "mismanagement" and fiscal irresponsibility.

The majority of the Hollywood Division is still in the hands of the present leadership, however, and Rosenberg was reelected to another three-year term.

The UFS faction plays on the legitimate concerns of actors about the current round of negotiations, but its program and personnel suggest that its "alternative" is to cozy up to management and sign deals, like the rotten AFTRA contract, without hesitation. Figures like Hanks are thoroughly embedded in the Hollywood establishment, and they would like to see the smooth operation of the entertainment industry machinery, a process that would benefit them and those closest to the studios.

If the truth be told, neither faction on the SAG leadership bodies has any perspective for advancing the living and artistic conditions of actors in the film and television industry. Both begin with an unwavering commitment to the profit system and accept the existence of a handful of massive entertainment conglomerates that decide the fate of hundreds of thousands.

Under conditions of a worldwide economic meltdown, can anyone in the film industry have any doubts about the companies' strategy? They will demand further and further concessions and impose more and more onerous conditions, all in the name of the "needs of the industry." In a statement October 1, the AMPTP appealed to the patriotism of performers, while denouncing all talk "about going on strike."

In a passage that the sharpest satirist would be hard pressed to

duplicate, the representatives of billionaire corporate executives wrote, "Not only is the business suffering from recent economic conditions, but if ever there was a time when Americans wanted the diversions of movies and television, it is now."

The AMPTP went on to note that the Directors and Writers Guilds and AFTRA "reached agreement on comparable terms [favorable to management] months ago, during far better economic times, and it is unrealistic for SAG negotiators now to expect even better terms during this grim financial climate. This is the harsh economic reality, and no strike will change that reality."

Both factions of SAG seek to subordinate workers, including the more privileged layers in the entertainment industry, to the profit requirements of big business. Integral to this strategy is the relationship between SAG and the Democratic Party.

On September 11, Hollywood luminaries staged a gala fundraising \$28,000-a-plate dinner in Beverly Hills for Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama. In attendance, and perhaps sharing the same tables, were both SAG superstars and AMPTP members. Obama was neither asked, nor did he offer, any comments on the SAG negotiations.

Writers, directors, performers, technicians and others in the film and television industry will be obliged to take up a fight against the giant companies. They will have to do so on a different political basis: a break with the Democratic Party and a socialist policy that places the economic and artistic interests of industry workers first. The giant conglomerates cannot be permitted to dictate and destroy conditions; they need to be nationalized and made public property, operated democratically by those who actually create the films and television programs.



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