

SAG to hold strike vote: the issues facing screen actors

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13 December 2008

On December 8, more than 450 actors from southern California attended a meeting called by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) to learn about the progress of negotiations between the union and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), representing the studios and television networks.

Talks between the screen actors' union and the employers broke down at the end of June when the AMPTP issued its final offer. The 120,000-member SAG is seeking improvements on union jurisdiction over programs created for the Internet and higher residual payments for new media and DVD sales. The studios and networks, which signed deals with the Writers and Directors guilds earlier this year that made minor concessions on new media, have been entirely intransigent. The giant conglomerates, under pressure from the unfolding economic crisis, intend to monopolize the revenues made from the Internet.

SAG brought in a federal mediator in October and November. Following the failure of two days of talks in late November between the guild, the Alliance and the mediator, SAG's leadership announced plans to hold a strike authorization vote. Guild president Alan Rosenberg and national executive director and chief negotiator Doug Allen have continuously emphasized that the union's national board would not necessarily call a walkout, but that the authorization is needed as a "tool" to force the AMPTP to return to the bargaining table.

At last Monday's SAG membership meeting in Los Angeles, many members expressed their anger at the AMPTP and support for a strike. In an informal vote, nearly all those present indicated they would vote for the strike authorization.

Two days later, the union announced it would send out ballots January 2 to SAG members in good standing. The results of the strike authorization vote won't be tabulated and revealed until January 23. A yes vote by 75 percent of those taking part in the vote is required to approve a strike authorization. The national board would then have the right, but not the obligation, to call a strike.

In reality, the SAG leadership has no perspective for a successful struggle against the predatory media giants intent on driving down the living standards of actors and everyone else in the entertainment industry and protecting their massive profits. The floundering of the guild leadership, whose occasional demagogic statements are belied by their indecision and inaction, opens the actors and other industry workers to great dangers.

Various "dissident" factions have emerged in SAG, some more self-serving than others, to oppose the present leadership's conduct. In some cases, quite well-heeled performers (no doubt backed by studio executives) are taking advantage of the present situation to press for an all-out surrender to the demands of the AMPTP. Many actors are no doubt wary about going on strike under the present conditions of economic crisis, with a leadership unprepared for a battle with the multinational giants.

The SAG leaders have been attempting to bluff the AMPTP for months, endlessly threatening a strike, which the studio and network chiefs have less and less reason to take seriously. In a message sent to union members in late November, Rosenberg wrote: "Your leadership believes that we must be empowered with the real threat of a work stoppage in order to let management know that we are committed to protecting the future of all actors."

Also in November, Rosenberg told an interviewer from KTLA-TV Los Angeles, "We have to put bullets in our gun in order to get a deal. Our hope is that will make the AMPTP come back to the table and talk to us."

Such hopes—in fact, wishful thinking—are unserious and irresponsible. Rosenberg and company are playing games with the jobs and livelihoods of their members. The AMPTP has not moved an inch in the face of SAG's antics and, indeed, now threatens to use the economic crisis as an excuse to withdraw its "final offer."

The AMPTP told its members in November, "At least until now, we have kept the offer on the table despite the precipitous economic decline of the last several months. Whether we will be able to continue to do so in the face of the economic downturn remains to be seen."

At the December 8 meeting, SAG's Allen emphasized again that the vote was not for a strike but for an authorization to call one, so as to obtain "leverage" in the negotiations. He repeated a point he'd made at a previous union meeting in Hollywood and which he himself reiterated in the most recent issue of the union's magazine, *Screen Actor*: "Our number one goal remains securing a good contract without a strike."

One of the guild leaflets handed actors before the Los Angeles meeting made it clear that "A yes vote does not mean there will be a strike. It means we can go back to the AMPTP with the power and resolve of all SAG actors."

More than a year has passed since the Writers Guild (WGA) members went out on strike. What have been the results of this round of negotiations? The WGA, Directors Guild (DGA) and AFTRA leaderships signed rotten deals, which provided for a pittance on payment for new media.

Last February, the WWSW declared that the WGA had capitulated to the studios and networks on payment for material for the Internet and warned, moreover, that the employers would find every possible means of avoiding the payments to which they had agreed. The studios and networks are notorious for their essentially criminal bookkeeping methods.

This warning has been thoroughly vindicated. The WGA was obliged to file a complaint in November against the AMPTP, alleging that the employers have reneged on the deal signed last winter and have not paid residuals for programming sold through electronic downloads or the streaming of television shows on the Internet.

So much for the "historic breakthrough" proclaimed by WGA leaders.

A serious strategy for writers, actors and all film and television workers would begin from the recognition that the private ownership of the media

giants and their relentless drive for profits are incompatible with the economic and artistic interests of those employed in the industry.

Under conditions of an unprecedented global meltdown, whatever gains have been made by workers in Hollywood, New York and elsewhere will come under direct and sustained attack. Actors and others will be called on to sacrifice in the interests of "the industry as a whole" and even told that their demands are "unpatriotic" at a time when the general population needs to be entertained. All this and more is wholly predictable.

SAG members have every reason to vote to authorize a strike in the face of the AMPTP's provocative intransigence, but they had better vote for such an action with their eyes open.

The timing of the guild's strike authorization vote may well have something to do with the holidays, various awards programs and other matters, but it is impossible to ignore the fact that the results will be announced three days after the inauguration of Barack Obama.

If it is part of the SAG leadership's calculations that a friendlier atmosphere for the actors' legitimate demands will exist after January 20, 2009, they are, again, simply fooling themselves. Indeed, the alliance of the unions, including SAG, with the Democratic Party, one of the two major big business parties, is a principal roadblock to the successful struggle to defend jobs and living standards.

Actors, writers, directors, crew and others need to consider and turn to socialist politics and policies as the only way out of the present situation, produced by the crisis and failure of capitalism.

SAG members speak to the WSWs

A WSWs reporter spoke to a number of the SAG members in attendance at the December 8 meeting in Los Angeles. The comments reveal both the determination of the actors to defend their jobs and gains, as well as continuing illusions in the Democratic Party and Obama in particular.

James Tripp, a stand-up comedian, commented on a number of issues.

On the need for a strike:

"Because the producers aren't taking us seriously. And I think they're going on the assumption that we're not going to strike."

On the conjunction of a strike and the present economic crisis:

"Well, it's unfortunate. I know the producers are trying to use it as a bargaining chip. But it's not just money we're concerned with, its rights and residuals, which are not really tied to any static economic situation. This is an ongoing thing. These are things that once they're taken away, we will not get them back. So as we move to new media it's important to preserve those formulas that existed under the old media, because if we don't, we won't be able to earn a living.

"It's not a studio town anymore, it's a corporation town. There are about six corporations that run this town, and it's hard to negotiate with these people. They're not worried about the long term. They're worried about the next quarter. We care more about the business than they do."

On whether he sees the actors' struggle as part of a broader struggle and the autoworkers:

"Absolutely we see it as part [of a broader struggle]. We are the face of unions across the country. For some reason, people would rather listen to us than to someone from the UAW and that gives us a certain responsibility.

"[Auto company management] blames the workers. But it's really all management. They weren't interested in making good cars. They were interested in making the cars that were making the most profit. And those were the SUVs. It's not good for the environment. It's not good for the

worker. It's not good for anybody. It's only good for these guys getting multimillion-dollar bonuses at the end of the year. And now they're going to blame the workers. Come on."

On Obama:

"I voted for Obama. I'm a big supporter. I think he's shown a great deal of leadership. And a willingness to work.

Anne DeSalvo, member of the SAG board, told the WSWs:

"The thought of doing work on the Internet and not getting residuals for it...they're destroying the middle-class actor. The actor lives on residuals. And then to have SAG contracts using non-SAG actors. It's not that we want to strike. It's that we can't sign what's on the table. The producers are taking advantage of the fact that there's an economic crisis. Again, there's no dignity. We're dead. Just dead. Between reality TV and no residuals."

Actor Ralph Lucas addressed a number of issues as well.

On the strike:

"I just think that the Internet is going to be the thing of the future. The [LA] Times, for example, is in deep trouble because of the Internet. I hope that we will go on strike."

On the situation facing actors:

"People don't realize that the vast majority of actors are struggling workers. The ones who are making the big money are stars, and I've never seen any stars come to the meetings. The rest of us are just working people. So we've got to protect ourselves as best as we can."

On the situation facing workers in general:

"Have you watched the news? There are strikes going on around the country. Some people are taking over a factory in Chicago. I lived through the Great Depression. My father said at that time, 'This is a strike by the rich people against the poor people.'"

A SAG member who asked that his name be withheld:

"I almost feel that [a strike] is inevitable. I feel that management has been so recalcitrant, so completely unwilling to negotiate.

"When cable came in, they said, 'Oh, it's experimental.' So we made agreements with them that are still in effect today, that aren't very good for actors. The same thing happened with DVDs.... And the same thing is true for new media, which is a huge new market. They're making billions of dollars off it already, and they say it's experimental and they don't want to give us what we want."

In response to a question about the coincidence of the economic crisis and a possible strike, he replied

"SAG was formed in the depths of the depression. I think you have to draw the line in the sand somewhere. They're just using that."

On Obama:

"I'm one of those liberals who voted, and now I've buried my head back in the sand. I guess he's put together the Clinton team. I don't know what that means. I just hope it doesn't mean bad things. I still say he's a sharp, liberal guy, and I think that he has to be inclusive of conservatives and right-wing people in order to be able to work with them"



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