

US: The crisis in the Screen Actors Guild and the need for a new political perspective

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The ongoing crisis in the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) underscores the need for a new political perspective that takes as its starting-point a struggle against the conglomerates that operate the television networks and major film studios. Neither the official SAG leadership nor the anti-strike “opposition” is capable of advancing the interests of actors and other artists and workers in the entertainment industry.

The SAG leadership, headed by President Alan Rosenberg and chief negotiator Doug Allen, has scheduled a strike authorization vote for January. The union is spending a good deal of time and effort on an “education campaign” to convince the membership to give its National Board the power to call a strike, all the while asserting they have no plan to actually organize a walkout by the screen actors.

The support of 75 percent of those taking part in the ballot is required for the strike authorization to pass. The results of the vote won't be known until January 23. If the authorization is rejected, SAG leaders indicate they will be obliged to accept the last offer made by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), the organization of studio and television network bosses.

SAG leaders have recently organized three meetings in Los Angeles (December 8 and 17) and New York City (December 15) to discuss the state of negotiations and argue in support of the strike authorization. The audiences at the Hollywood meetings have been generally favorable to a strike, while Rosenberg and Allen faced strong opposition at the New York gathering.

The issues in the dispute are fairly stark. The studios and networks are attempting to monopolize for themselves the wealth to be made from material distributed via new media, the Internet in particular. The AMPTP is demanding that programs streamed on the Internet play residual-free for seventeen days, after which period actors are to be compensated with a pittance.

Under the present contract, a guest-appearance on a one-hour television program (network) earns an actor a minimum of \$3,300 and he or she receives the same amount for the first re-run, with diminishing returns for further repeats. As one actor put it to the WSWS, “This [the AMPTP proposal] means the end of residuals forever. It's opening the door to a debacle for those of us who are not stars, but depend on residuals as our bread and butter.”

The producers are also demanding that all new shows with a budget

of less than \$15,000 a minute streamed on the Internet be non-union, at the employer's discretion.

In addition, the media giants insist that the union must give up all claims, worth well over \$80 million, stemming from force majeure provisions in the present contract. These protect actors by compensating them in case the shows they are working on stop production because of another union's work stoppage—in this case, the writers' strike at the end of last year and the beginning of this one—or “an act of God,” meaning any natural disaster.

Also, the producers want actors to advertise products in scripted shows without any compensation and even if the product violates the actor's code of ethics.

The Rosenberg-Allen leadership has been attempting to bluff the studios and networks with the threat of a strike for six months, without the slightest success. The conglomerates are united in their determination to lower costs and maintain their profits at the expense of the actors, writers, directors and everyone else involved in the production of television programs and films.

Some 600 SAG members attended the December 16 meeting at the Renaissance Hotel in Hollywood. The anger of those in attendance at the arrogance and intransigence of the media corporations was palpable. But SAG leaders had nothing more to say than they did at the previous meeting 11 days before.

Rosenberg and Allen repeated their mantra that a vote in favor of a strike does not mean there will be a strike. The SAG president stated at one point that “we should not be talking about a strike, but about the authorization for a strike.” He insisted that such authorization would merely be a tool to force the AMPTP to give in to the union's demands.

In fact, in an advisory message prominently displayed on SAG's web site, Allen is quoted as follows:

“I am confident that members around the country will empower our negotiating team with the leverage and strength of unified Screen Actors Guild members. Our objective remains to get a deal that SAG members will ratify—not to go on strike.”

This is truly fighting from one's knees.

Inevitably, given the SAG leadership's impotence and the unfolding economic calamity, which threatens film and television workers with devastation, a great deal of confusion abounds within SAG's ranks. Taking advantage of that confusion and seeking to make use of it to organize a surrender to the employers a "dissident" faction has arisen, including some of the biggest names in Hollywood.

Rival petitions, one in favor of the strike authorization and one opposed to it, are currently being circulated online. The pro-strike petition claims to have more than 2,500 signatures, while the anti-strike statement has gathered some 1,400 signatures. Those favoring the strike vote include Laura Dern, Mel Gibson, Holly Hunter, Hal Holbrook, Matthew Modine, Alicia Witt, Sandra Oh and Martin Sheen. Those opposed include George Clooney, Tom Hanks, John Cusack, Susan Sarandon, Danny DeVito and Charlie Sheen.

Many SAG members are no doubt hesitant about launching a strike, given the poor results of the Writers Guild strike a year ago, after a determined and courageous effort by the writers, and the lack of leadership in the actors guild.

However, the right-wing and, frankly, cowardly character of many of the arguments put forward by those opposed to a strike authorization needs to be exposed. Here we have a good many well-to-do Hollywood types, who make fabulous amounts of money, preaching self-sacrifice and restraint to those who are struggling to survive.

On December 17, for example, the *Los Angeles Times* published a column by former SAG president Melissa Gilbert, headlined "SAG shouldn't strike," which called the strike authorization vote "a foolhardy move that endangers not only the union but our entire entertainment industry, the economy of the communities in which we work and our country as a whole. Now is not the time for a strike."

Gilbert continued, "I am not swayed by arguments that, given the current economic conditions, now is a good time to strike. How can any SAG member vote to knowingly put so many people, in our industry and in myriad associated businesses, into further jeopardy during the largest financial crisis since the Depression? Unemployment in California is expected to hover around 9 percent in 2009, and home values here still haven't hit bottom. A strike would bring Los Angeles to a grinding halt, and the economic damage would ripple across the county and the state."

In other words, actors should abandon any notion of struggling against the employers and accept whatever the studios and networks think they can afford in these difficult times. This is a recipe for disaster that simply opens the door to more concessions, roll-backs and the destruction of decades of effort by film and television workers to guarantee a decent standard of living. The realities Gilbert cites should lead many actors to precisely the opposite conclusion: the economic crisis demonstrates the failure of capitalism and the need for a resolute struggle against the status quo.

Many at the December 17 meeting in Hollywood expressed contempt for Gilbert and her arguments.

It is worth noting that the web site devoted to opposing a strike has posted a piece entitled "Labor Reality," which argues that "it is intellectually immature of those at the top to believe they can run counterintuitive to the thinking of some of labor's hardest and most devoted fighters" and "this is the wrong time to be pushing the inside of the envelope."

The blog entry goes on to reprint in its entirety—apparently approvingly—a recent Washington Post article outlining the abject capitulation of the United Auto Workers leadership ("labor's hardest and most devoted fighters") to the demands of Congress and the automakers. The UAW betrayal of autoworkers' interests is presented by this SAG member as "realistic" and "mature." This is what a section of SAG has in store for actors.

A supporter of the Socialist Equality Party was warmly received at the Hollywood SAG meeting December 17.

He began, "Many people at this meeting have referred to the greed of the corporations and the studios. But let's call it by its real name: capitalism."

He explained that "we are facing the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression ... This crisis, which is unlike any other we have seen in our lifetimes, has to be resolved—resolved on the backs of working people everywhere. The studios and the conglomerates that run them have made a decision: to take away the most basic economic rights of their workers so they can maintain their yachts and 20-bathroom homes."

The SAG member called for a turn to the working class as a whole, a break with the Democratic Party and a challenge to the private ownership of the media conglomerates.

He argued, "Now is the time to organize a giant campaign to appeal to the people of this city and all over the world; find the connection with them and then engage in industrial action, which will inevitably pose the question: who will own this business—we or the conglomerates? Are we going to allow the private accumulation of wealth to trump social need?"

"Those are the socialist policies we should fight for. A strike committee, set up by the rank and file, must be formed and be guided by them."



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