

SAG leadership postpones strike authorization vote

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On December 22, leaders of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) announced a postponement of a scheduled strike authorization vote until the guild's national board meets in Los Angeles to discuss the matter January 12 and 13.

In a message to SAG's 120,000 members, National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator Doug Allen noted the divisions in the union over the proposed strike vote. He wrote: "While almost 100 high profile members and 2524 total members have endorsed the strike authorization vote mandated by the National Board, more than 100 high profile actors and 1373 actors have lent their names to the opposition campaign. This division does not help our effort to get an agreement from the AMPTP [Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers] that our members will ratify."

According to the message, Allen and SAG President Alan Rosenberg decided to call "a special face-to-face" meeting of the national board "to discuss how we can address this unfortunate division."

Allen continued: "In light of the subject matter of this special meeting, the strike authorization balloting will be re-scheduled to take place over a three-week period immediately following this special board meeting. This will provide us with more time to conduct member education and outreach on the referendum before the balloting."

However, given the opposition and dissension that exists on the national board, it is reasonable to ask whether the strike vote will ever take place. Various "dissident" factions, backed by the media, are campaigning for Allen's dismissal or resignation and a shake-up in the negotiating committee.

This would represent a victory for the union's right wing, but the truth is that neither the Rosenberg-Allen faction nor its critics has any perspective for defending the living

standards or professional and artistic interests of SAG members.

The strike authorization ballots were to have been mailed to the guild membership on January 2, with the results to be announced three weeks later. Seventy-five percent of those voting would have had to approve a strike authorization for the action to be approved. The actual calling of a walkout would still have been in the hands of the national board, now controlled by "moderates" who have come out against the strike and for a settlement along the lines of the rotten contract that the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) signed this past summer with the AMPTP. [See: "American Federation of Radio and Television Artists approves new contract on terms set by media conglomerates"]

For the past five and a half months, since the expiry of the SAG contract June 30, the guild leadership has repeated over and over that a strike authorization was no more than a negotiating tool to convince the AMPTP of the screen actors' determination to obtain a 'fair' contract. At the union's last town hall meeting, Rosenberg reiterated that "we should not be talking about a strike, but about the authorization for a strike."

The procrastination and impotence of the SAG leadership have only created confusion in the union's ranks and encouraged the well-heeled and well-connected elements, close to the studio and network bosses, who would like to see the guild capitulate to the AMPTP demands.

The employers are attempting to monopolize the wealth created by new media. The AMPTP and its apologists argue that the pittance the conglomerates are offering can be "renegotiated" in the next contract. The entertainment business has heard this before, on the subject of home video in the 1980s. Writers and actors have lost billions in video and DVD sales as a result.

Many actors are well aware that from the beginning, despite all rhetoric to the contrary, SAG's leaders were kowtowing to the moguls. They have treated the studio heads, determined to impose the economic crisis on the backs of Hollywood artists and craftspeople, as wrongheaded friends and professional colleagues. They have also held separate meetings with several big-name actors in the union to placate them.

No faction within the SAG leadership has the foggiest idea how to defend the actors against the predatory attacks by the studios and networks, who are calling for non-payment of residuals for old and original programs streamed on the Internet; cancellation of all payments under *force majeure* provisions in existence for 50 years; forced participation of actors in scripted commercials without any compensation; non-union programs created for the Internet if they cost less than \$15,000 per minute; and a host of other rollbacks.

Actor Stephen Condon noted December 24 in the *Los Angeles Daily News*: "Fifteen years ago, as a contract player, I was able to make \$1,577 per episode. Under the terms offered by AMPTP now, for Internet, I would make only \$22.77. Are people really going to watch a TV show on the Internet? You bet they will!

"Sony televisions are already being sold to take an Internet connection directly—not through a computer. Soon you won't be able to distinguish between shows originating from the networks, and those originating from the Internet. The only one who will be able to tell is me, from my \$22.77 paycheck.

"It is a big con, and producers know it. AMPTP wants actors to give up residuals on all new/now media, knowing full well that programs could run forever and we, the actors, would never make a nickel.

"Just look at my career. Nearly 70 percent of my income is generated from residuals. I couldn't live or support my family if it weren't for the residuals I earn."

SAG's leadership claims it has been stalwart on the question of residuals and other issues. But its refusal to elaborate a strategy that could mobilize actors and the entire entertainment industry has created a situation in which the most likely outcome will be another blow to performers' living standards. If the national board votes down a strike vote, or if the membership does not authorize a strike by a 75 percent majority, Rosenberg and Allen will no doubt

blame the SAG ranks and claim "we did all we could do."

This is entirely false. The problem is, above all, a political one. The current SAG leadership and its various opponents in the union begin from the same perspective: defense of the private ownership of the film and television industry and its right to make profits out of the efforts of performers and technicians, and the political complement of that defense, support for the Democratic Party.

In his recent message to the membership, SAG President Rosenberg commented: "Actors have experienced the strife that this economic turmoil has brought, as have all Americans. Our hearts go out to our union brothers and sisters who have lost their jobs, and to the thousands of United Auto Workers facing uncertain futures. But unionism is alive and well in this country as union workers rely even more on their unions for protection and advocacy."

The United Auto Workers bureaucracy currently is in the process of carrying out its greatest betrayal yet, agreeing to the destruction of all the gains accumulated by auto workers in decades of struggle. It has signaled its willingness to do anything to make the auto industry profitable. The various union leaderships in Hollywood would do no less.

As the events of the past year in the entertainment industry should have proven, trade unionism, even of the militant variety, is entirely incapable of confronting the current economic crisis, which is a crisis of historic and systemic proportions. Actors, writers and others need to begin considering broader political and social questions. That will inevitably mean a turn to socialist politics.



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