# Once more on the crisis in the Screen Actors Guild

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**20 January 2009**

The two-day meeting of the Screen Actors Guild's National Board last week left the union's leadership in disarray and adds to the dangers facing actors and the entire workforce in the entertainment industry.

A great deal of murkiness surrounds the differences between the two leading factions in SAG—personal, professional and other kinds of rivalry and pettiness play no small role. This much, however, is clear: neither the grouping around SAG president Alan Rosenberg and executive director and chief negotiator Doug Allen nor their opponents—Unite for Strength, allied with New York and regional guild leaders—have any perspective for advancing the financial and artistic interests of film and television performers.

The two groupings agree on the fundamental issues: acceptance of the corporate stranglehold over the film and television industry; tailoring their demands to the profit needs of the giant conglomerates; and continuing the subordination of workers to big business through an alliance with the Democratic Party.

At the 30-hour marathon session January12-13, the Unite for Strength group, which gained a slight majority on the board during last fall's elections, introduced a motion to fire Allen as the union's chief negotiator with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). SAG's contract expired last June 30 and the media conglomerates have arrogantly refused to improve their miserable "final offer."

A three-part resolution, which would have ousted Allen, canceled the strike authorization vote proposed by the current leadership and replaced the negotiating committee, introduced by the opposition faction at last week's meeting, failed as a result of parliamentary maneuvers on the part of the Rosenberg-Allen grouping.

The Unite for Strength-New York faction has complained bitterly about the "undemocratic" nature of the leadership's actions at last week's meeting, but there is no reason to have confidence in the opposition's own democratic credentials.

With some legitimacy, Allen points out that 97 percent of SAG's board mandated a strike authorization vote in October if federal mediation failed, which occurred in November. Moreover, in a non-binding poll also taken in October, some 87 percent of SAG members voting rejected the AMPTP contract. And in the current "battle of the petitions," 4,000 SAG members have signed a petition supporting a strike authorization vote, while 2,000 have put their names to one opposing the action.

The SAG opposition gains its confidence from the support it receives from the entertainment media, such as *Variety*, the mouthpiece for studio executives, and many big-name, well-heeled film stars. Cutting through the propaganda, Unite for Strength stands for an immediate capitulation to the studios and networks. That would open the door to union-busting, non-payment of residuals for DVDs or digital media, the cancellation of all force majeure provisions, forced inscripted advertisement on television shows and a host of other rollbacks.

That being said, the recourse of the Rosenberg-Allen faction to stalling tactics and filibustering speaks to its own inability and unwillingness to mobilize wide layers of actors and other workers in film and television in defense of their interests.

The confusion, stalling and impotence of the SAG leadership has helped dissipate much of the militancy among the rank-and-file, especially in the Hollywood branch, where support for strike authorization was strong.

In the aftermath of the January 12-13 meeting, Allen has proposed suspending the strike authorization vote and holding a union-wide vote on the AMPTP contract proposal, preceded by one final effort to get the employers to improve their offer. He further proposed that the AMPTP offer "be sent to the members with Pro and Con statements from National Board members and that otherwise the Guild would remain neutral during any member debate regarding ratification."

There is no reason to believe that the media concerns will budge an inch, but the proposal has had the effect of exposing the opposition's "democratic" pretensions. Its leaders have denounced such a vote on the grounds that the present leadership "can't be trusted." It's more likely these elements, very close to the studio bosses, have no interest in finding out what SAG members really think about the AMPTP offer.

Neither faction is serious about a struggle against the conglomerates, particularly under conditions of an economic slump. While campaigning for a strike authorization, Rosenberg and Allen have continuously emphasized that they

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view this simply as a tool to use as leverage during the negotiations if and when the AMPTP returns to the bargaining table. Above all, they caution everyone within hearing, it does not necessarily mean a strike.

Recently, SAG members throughout the country received the *Call Sheet*, a newsletter put out by the Hollywood branch, which advises actors in the lead article that "You will be getting a ballot soon in the mail which will ask you to give the Screen Actors Guild National Board strike authority as a tool to end management's intransigence in bargaining the TV/Theatrical [films] Contract. It does not mean you are voting to strike, only to give your board the power to call one if necessary."

Four paragraphs later, the article reiterates this position once again that "voting *does not* guarantee a strike will happen." Allen himself writes on page 2 that "Nobody wants a strike." On page 3, under the heading, "Myth and Reality," the mantra is repeated again: "First, a strike authorization does not guarantee a strike." And so forth.

It doesn't take a great deal of insight to grasp that studio and network executives, representing some of the most powerful and ruthless media and corporate interests in America, are not likely to be moved by a vote authorizing an action the SAG leaders practically promise in advance will not be organized! To put forward such a strategy is the height of self-delusion and its chief effect is to disorient SAG members.

Having induced the other entertainment union leaderships—writers, directors, AFTRA—to accept rotten deals, the AMPTP has made it clear that it has no interest—and no intention—of returning to the bargaining table unless the union accepts its draconian proposals, which include rollbacks in a variety of areas and refusal to pay residuals on programs, both original and derivative, streamlined through the internet. (See "US: The crisis in the Screen Actors Guild and the need for a new political perspective")

Actors and other workers in film and television need a new perspective, which begins from an accurate and sober assessment of the current economic and political situation, the most severe crisis since the Great Depression. Whatever illusions may exist in Barack Obama, the new administration will continue the policies of the old: wider wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, massive bailouts to the banks, austerity for the working class at home. The only policy for the entertainment industry that can defend workers' interests is one that consciously rejects capitalism and the big business parties that serve it.

To prosecute a serious struggle, actors will need to set up their own independent action committees made up of members elected from the rank-and-file. A campaign must be waged throughout the industry to involve all other artists, as well as craft workers, in a mobilization against the industry as a whole. The committees must take measures to involve the rest of the working population of Los Angeles, which is facing relentless cutbacks in education, health and welfare.

They must pose before the entire working class: who is going to control the industry—the moguls, whose only interest is defending their class position and the private accumulation of wealth, or the people who work for a living in the industry and who are, in the final analysis, the source of all its wealth? Finally, the committees must consider what is the relationship between the actors as artists and the population as a whole. Are artists to subjugate their art and creativity to the dictates and vagaries of the conglomerates' needs, or must they enhance freedom of artistic expression by controlling the industry for which they work?

The industry and news media are engaging in a concerted fear-mongering campaign to frighten actors from waging a fight for their interests. They have predicted "suicide" for SAG if it strikes during these difficult economic times, for such an action would cause unemployment for hundreds, if not thousands, of other workers in the industry—which, incidentally, is enjoying record profits.

This is reality turned upside down. Actors and other workers are in the most vulnerable position when they don't struggle. The studios and networks will push ahead with their attacks. Warner Brothers, basking in the glory of the super-profitable *The Dark Knight*, has just asked all its departments to cut their budgets by at least 10 percent. This would translate into the firing of at least 100 employees. Apparently, the cuts would signify a savings of tens of millions of dollars for Time Warner. The studio has also announced that it will be drafting plans to outsource scores of "back office" workers' jobs to India and Poland.

Sony, Universal, Paramount, Disney, Twentieth Century Fox and Metro Goldwyn Mayer will soon follow suit.

California has become a focal point of attacks against the living standards of the working population. On Friday, the state comptroller John Chiang said that the state, to close a $42 billion budget deficit, would freeze tax refunds ($1.9 billion) and hundreds of millions of dollars in other payments, including developmental disability services ($280 million); cash grants for needy families, the elderly, the blind and disabled ($300 million); court operations ($205 million); mental health services ($77 million); Medi-Cal administration ($22 million); and CalGRANTS student aid ($13 million).

The present situation creates the objective basis for a unified industrial and political struggle by workers against the efforts to impose the economic calamity, caused by the operations of the profit system, on their backs.

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