

110,000 US actors to vote on contract

The issues facing Screen Actors Guild members

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28 May 2009

On May 19 ballots were sent out to some 110,000 Screen Actors Guild members throughout the US, asking them to vote “yes” or “no” on the tentative agreement reached between negotiators for SAG and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). SAG members, who have to return their ballots by June 9, have been without a contract for 11 months.

The contract packet sent out to the guild membership includes “pro” and “con” statements, reflecting the deep divisions that still exist within SAG’s national executive board, which approved the deal 53.4 to 46.6 percent before recommending it to the membership.

On the other hand, on May 11 the executive board of the Hollywood branch rejected recommending the agreement by a 72.7 to 27.3 percent vote. The rank and file of the Hollywood branch, the largest in the country (with some 60 percent of the total membership), has consistently voiced its opposition to the contract.

The agreement is a rotten one, which would set actors back decades and create the framework within which the studios and networks could make vast sums out of New Media/Internet, just as they have done for the last several decades, at the expense of writers and performers, out of videos and DVDs.

The provisions allowing the giant entertainment corporations to use cheap labor on New Media/Internet productions and avoid paying residuals on ad-supported sites, along with various other concessions, represent an attack on gains built up over years of struggle. Nothing good for actors can come out of a deal reached behind closed doors between Hollywood moguls and SAG leaders.

SAG members should reject the contract and prepare for a struggle with the conglomerates. However, many political and social issues bound up with such a struggle need to be seriously considered.

The vote on the proposed SAG contract is taking place in the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the Depression. While the stock market has risen in the past several months because big investors are convinced that the Obama

administration will defend their interests come what may, the conditions in the “real economy” continue to deteriorate on a daily basis. More than 5 million jobs have been lost since December 2007, housing prices have fallen more than 30 percent since their peak, foreclosures are at record levels and social misery is widespread.

Chrysler has entered bankruptcy and General Motors is expected to follow suit, while the federal government, management and the United Auto Workers collaborate to impose massive cuts on auto workers. The savaging of health care and retirement benefits for auto workers will open the floodgates for every employer to attack wages and benefits.

The state of California, where the majority of SAG members live and work, is effectively bankrupt. In the wake of the defeat of the various ballot propositions May 19, the state is proposing to slash \$5 billion from public education on top of the more than \$8 billion already cut from the 2009-2010 budget. Tens of thousands of teachers and state (and city) workers are threatened with layoffs. While Obama’s Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, a shill for Wall Street, is providing the big banks and financial institutions with billions in public funds, there is nothing for the states or municipalities.

The Obama administration, which promised change, is carrying out right-wing policies on every front: the economy, Afghanistan and Iraq, democratic rights. It ruthlessly defends the interests of the corporate-financial aristocracy that rules the US.

The working population is receiving blows to its living standards, jobs, retirement benefits, home values and hopes for a decent life on a daily basis. These attacks will provoke a powerful response. The American working class is not going to see its conditions of life devastated without resistance.

Capitalism has failed, and failed particularly spectacularly in California, one of the most advanced economies and societies on the planet.

The new leadership of SAG, the Unite For Strength faction and its allies, supported by a good number of well-heeled performers with close ties to the studio executives, cites the economic conditions as an excuse to surrender to the AMPTP.

The argument that “If you fight things will only be worse” is a wretched and cowardly one, and the entire history of the working class in the US and globally proves the opposite. Working people only make gains when they resist. The traditions of struggle of the American working class need to be revived after decades of their suppression, thanks in large measure to the AFL-CIO officialdom, which has transformed itself into one of the corporate “stakeholders.”

SAG’s Interim National Executive Director David White, an enthusiastic supporter of the proposed contract, has impeccable establishment credentials. Responding to charges that White was all too cozy with management, Unite For Strength’s Ned Vaughn recently told the *Los Angeles Times* that “this is a business built on relationships and the idea that you don’t want somebody on the job who has solid relationships and commands respect from the industry executives is ridiculous.”

White, who currently earns \$400,000 from SAG and is “widely respected” in the business, now pushes a contract vetted by those executives who are trying to send actors back to the 1930s.

The Membership First faction, on the other hand, associated with SAG President Alan Rosenberg, has demonstrated its incapacity to provide leadership over the past year. Alternately demagogic and conciliatory, unable to develop any coherent strategy, the Rosenberg group also bears responsibility for the actors’ present predicament.

Rosenberg and former National Executive Director Doug Allen, in the face of a fear-mongering campaign waged by the industry and local media, reminded SAG members over and over again that a strike authorization did not mean a strike at all, but was merely a bargaining tool. This effort to bluff some of the most predatory corporate sharks fooled no one but themselves.

The Membership First’s bluster and threats to strike, which no one believed in, only demoralized SAG members and, in fact, made them susceptible to the “smart” and “realistic” arguments of the leadership faction that simply wants to throw in the towel.

In the end, the two factions share a common social outlook, one that begins with an acceptance of the corporate dominance of the film and television industry and the subordination of actors’ interests to the profit needs of the giant conglomerates. The argument is made that performers should not accept concessions because Warner, ABC/Disney, NBC/Universal and the rest are making money hand over fist. And what if they weren’t? Should actors and other film and television workers accept concessions under those conditions? Tying workers to the fate of the corporations has proven fatal, in the auto industry and everywhere else.

The working class needs its own independent strategy for the present crisis. What actors face, a far-reaching reduction in living standards as the entertainment companies pursue New Media, is the particular form in which the vast restructuring of

American industry and social life is taking place. Thousands of layoffs have already taken place in the film and television industry, even while, according to Rupert Murdoch, “The movie business ... is booming right now.”

Hollywood is one of the last bastions of trade union militancy. We encourage every form of struggle, but no one should fool him or herself that trade unionism is capable of confronting either the immediate attacks of the studios and networks or the more general economic breakdown. The Unite For Strength faction leaders, although from a right-wing, defeatist standpoint, are right when they point to the hollowness of Rosenberg’s declamations and the lack of alternative they offer. A new political, social and cultural perspective is urgently needed.

Actors must align themselves, not only with writers, directors and crew members, but with the working class in Los Angeles, New York, Detroit and the entire country. The inevitable smear campaigns of *Variety* and the *Los Angeles Times* can only be answered by the organization of rank-and-file committees that reach out to teachers, city and state workers, the unemployed—independently of the union bureaucracies—as part of a social counteroffensive against the bankers, the entertainment corporations and the Democratic and Republican politicians.

Conglomerate executives like Fox’s Murdoch, Disney’s Robert Iger and the various boards of directors are among the most parasitic and useless figures in America. They contribute nothing to cultural life, they merely poison the atmosphere while accumulating vast personal fortunes. And now they will demand that actors and other workers “tighten their belts” so they can maintain their fortunes. Why should film and television production remain in their hands? The conglomerates should become public property, operated democratically by artists, technicians and administrators.

To defend and extend living standards, to create jobs, to improve film and television production, to improve the cultural level in the US, actors, writers and directors need a socialist understanding and orientation. A break with the Democratic Party and all illusions in the reactionary Obama administration, a conscious turn toward the problems of the global working class—it is only on this general basis that actors can prosecute a successful struggle.



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