

US: Screen Actors Guild membership ratifies contract

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Nearly one year after the expiration of their old contract, Screen Actors Guild members have ratified a new two-year deal with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). The results of the vote were announced Tuesday evening.

Some 35 percent of the 110,000 SAG members who received ballots voted on the contract, with 78 percent voting in favor and 22 percent opposed. According to SAG's official tally, 70.7 percent of the Hollywood Division, 85.7 percent of the New York Division and 89.1 percent of the Regional Branch Divisions voted in favor of the deal, tentatively reached April 17.

The agreement is essentially the same "take-it-or-leave-it final offer" contract that the studios and networks offered a year ago. Taking effect 12:01 a.m. June 10 and expiring on June 30, 2011, the agreement covers film, television, digital programs, and productions for new media.

The contract is a rotten one; it follows the pattern of agreements signed over the past 17 months by Hollywood's other major entertainment unions: the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), the Writers Guild of America (WGA), and the Directors Guild of America.

Actors will immediately get a 3 percent raise, and a 3.5 percent increase during the second year of the contract. Much ballyhooed by the faction that now controls the union's national board by a slim majority are the minimal residuals actors will get for new shows that stream on Web sites such as Hulu, which is free of charge to viewers. (See "The issues facing Screen Actors Guild members" for more details on the contract.)

The contract negotiations, which began in April 2008, and subsequent stalemate triggered a bitter conflict

within the SAG leadership.

The Membership First group, led by two-term SAG President Alan Rosenberg (who announced his candidacy for a third term on Tuesday) and since ousted Executive Director Doug Allen, opposed the AMPTP's terms as "unacceptable." They pointed to the creation of "a residual-free/non-union zone in New Media" and denounced the rollbacks the entertainment corporations were demanding. However, Membership First never presented the membership with any coherent program to defend jobs and working conditions.

Instead, they substituted demagoguery and empty threats, alternating with conciliatory statements. For months, Rosenberg and Allen campaigned for a strike authorization vote to be held, always claiming that such a vote would merely be a "bargaining tool" and that no industrial action would necessarily come of it.

SAG members are not fools. They witnessed the 2007-08 WGA strike, which lasted 100 days. Despite the determination and solidarity of the writers, the entertainment conglomerates barely budged. They made minor concessions to end the strike, but established the principle that New Media would be organized entirely on the corporations' terms, with writers and others earning a pittance from the new technologies.

The inaction and impotence of the Rosenberg leadership, whose bravado impressed no one but themselves, emboldened elements within the union, led by members of Unite For Strength, who are close to management and wanted to settle on any terms. In response to the empty rhetoric of the Rosenberg-Allen faction, Unite For Strength preached "smart" and "realistic" unionism, and explained that the givebacks were necessary because of the "bad economy."

Every straw poll and informal vote indicated that a majority of the membership, certainly in Hollywood, thought the deal reached by the new SAG leadership, under Interim National Executive Director David White, was a bad one. If many actors held their nose and voted for it anyway, this was a vote of no-confidence in the entire guild leadership.

Leaders of the Unite for Strength faction naturally claimed that the vote vindicated their strategy of capitulating to management. In fact, Adam Arkin of Unite For Strength commented candidly to *Variety*, "I'm a little surprised that the vote was this overwhelming. I think people were tired of the unresolved issues and the fact that so much of the new TV work was going to AFTRA."

Rosenberg also expressed surprise, "It may be due to fatigue, fear and the economy. This contract will have a devastating impact."

SAG's Interim National Executive Director White demonstrated once more his servility to the conglomerates, commenting, "This decisive vote gets our members back to work with immediate pay raises and puts SAG in a strong position for the future.... Our members can expect more positive changes in the coming months as we organize new work opportunities, repair and reinvigorate our relationships with our sister unions and industry partners."

The AMPTP, representing the media giants, gloated after the announcement of the results Tuesday: "The ratification vote by SAG members is good news for the entertainment industry. This concludes a two-year negotiating process that has resulted in agreements with all major Hollywood guilds and unions." The companies' profits have been ensured in the process, along with the vast personal wealth of the studio and network heads.

Membership First reacted bitterly to the vote result, commenting on its blog, "The vote on the SAG TV/Theatrical Contract has demonstrated that 78 percent of the membership agrees to creating a residual free/non-union zone in New Media. They also are trusting that AFTRA, the DGA and the WGA will negotiate with SAG in two years. And let's not forget that included in the deal are management's rollbacks like clip consent and force majeure. So be it."

To paraphrase Bertolt Brecht, the obvious answer is to dissolve the membership and elect another!

In fact, what the debacle of Membership First shows is the incapacity of trade unionism, militant or otherwise, to address the problems of the contemporary film and television industry. It's not necessary to overestimate the political understanding of SAG members, but they clearly grasped that threats of militancy and even strike action alone could not solve the current situation.

What is to be done in the face of the utter intransigence of a handful of giant corporations who control much of what the US population sees and hears on a daily basis?

A different political orientation, a socialist one, is the beginning point for the development of a strategy to defend and improve conditions in the entertainment industry. The ongoing economic crisis will mean relentless demands for concessions by the studios and networks. If film and television production remains in private hands, it will be at the expense of writers, directors, actors and crew members.



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