

Producers push reckless resumption of North American film production in face of pandemic

Lee Parsons**11 August 2020**

With the daily number of COVID-19 infections and deaths still climbing in some of the leading centres of film production in North America—including California, New York and Georgia—organizations governing workers on both sides of the camera have come out in lock step in their drive to resume film and television production.

Most of the two million-plus workers who directly or indirectly are employed in the North American film industry have been idled during the pandemic and now face uncertain futures. Producers and distributors seeking to fill a growing shortage of content are presently ushering these employees back to work, with governments of every political stripe giving a green light to the resumption of film and video production.

This drive coincides with the termination of emergency benefits and funding that have temporarily kept millions from hunger and homelessness. Workers are being forced to return virtually unprotected to the workplace—in this case, film studios and sets—or face financial ruin. In Canada, come September, the millions of people on the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) will be transitioned onto the “enhanced” federal EI program, which generally means less money for the few who qualify at all.

Increasingly, jobs in the film industry are short-term engagements without any security and most have schedules, even for series productions, spanning no more than a few months each year. Particularly in regions with harsher climates such as New York and Toronto, the work season can be further limited, with workers obliged to supplement their income with other jobs or by subsisting on unemployment benefits. The pandemic has made matters worse by depriving them of work in the peak summer months, so that the ending of emergency benefits will have a particularly devastating impact on this sector, leaving most without adequate income for the year.

Jurisdictions that instituted social distancing and other protective measures in the early days of the pandemic have recklessly lifted restrictions, despite the cost in lives of workers. Powerful media and film giants are among the most aggressive in the back-to-work drive.

Statements such as those by New York Mayor Bill de Blasio underscore the hypocrisy of corralling workers into production studios without any protection guarantees. “We want to bring people back to work... But safety and health first, always,” de Blasio pledged. The reality is that, with governments standing aside, dozens of films and digital programming projects are plowing headlong into production under a patchwork of unenforceable and confusing guidelines.

The legal restrictions put in place early on in the pandemic have generally given way to voluntary protocols such as those spelled out in “The Safe Way Forward,” a report issued collectively by the Directors Guild of America (DGA), SAG-AFTRA (Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists), representing actors, IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees), representing film crews, and the Teamsters.

For the film industry, this translates into a multi-tiered system of

inadequate protections, including voluntary safeguards for workers and technicians alongside greater protections for performers and producers who can’t be treated as dispensable. The class divide that has always been clearly delineated in the film world is now defined by actual walls separating zones of protection, as the above document seeks to justify, stating, “It’s important to remember that performers are the most vulnerable people on the set.”

An equivalent document in Canada referred to as “Section 21,” from the Ontario Ministry of Labour, explicitly excludes both legal and medical advice, offering benign “guidance” to employers who are intent on resuming production during the pandemic. Face shields, a limit of ten-hour days, isolating “pods” and “depopulating the set” are some of the changes being promoted as protections for film crews.

The studios are claiming the ten-hour day is a health measure, but in fact it is a self-serving strategy to save two hours of overtime pay. With no provisions for oversight let alone enforcement, these measures amount to little more than lip service from production companies and professional organizations seeking to present a responsible public face.

Writers have been instructed to reduce or eliminate sets and locations such as bars and concerts that require crowds of background performers. Actors from out of the country are being required to rehearse their roles in isolation and are kept behind barriers away from camera crews and support staff. Although those involved in digital work, such as set designers, graphic artists and visual effects artists, can work remotely, the vast majority must work on site.

A grim indication of the danger of a return to work, and one of the biggest obstacles production companies are facing, is the fact that currently no insurance company will provide coverage to a film production without a COVID-19 exclusion clause. This has itself halted a number of productions and jeopardized new investment. In Canada, the government of Quebec has recently filled that gap with the announcement of \$51 million in financial assistance for film producers to fill in where insurance companies won’t, while the Canadian Media Producers Association (CMPA) has appealed to the federal government to provide a \$100 million insurance backstop to the industry.

The second largest centre of film production on the continent, New York City, has just entered “phase four” of the state’s reopening drive, coming just over a month after California allowed production to resume. In British Columbia, the provincial government and film commissions are framing the province as a safe haven for film production due the currently low rates of infection, even though there continue to be reported outbreaks at hospitals and care homes.

Big budget productions such as “Mission Impossible 7,” starring Tom Cruise, have notably been given special exemptions from quarantine restrictions in the UK and elsewhere to limit investor losses. Numerous other reports have emerged of non-union productions and commercials circumventing quarantines or other restrictions, with actors, directors and various others with influence flying under the radar with the tacit approval

of officials.

The contraction in revenues for the film industry has been sharp and global, with the Chinese market down by \$2 billion by March of this year. North American box office receipts are at their lowest level since 1998, and it is estimated that global box office revenues could drop by over \$5 billion due to the pandemic.

In addition to the halt in new production, dozens of films have had their theatrical release cancelled, suspended or postponed, and in many cases are instead getting early home media releases or going directly to video on demand (VOD). Obscene profits are at stake, exemplified by the fact that there were 10 films released last year that each generated \$1.6 billion in revenues.

Various awards ceremonies and film festivals have also been reduced, postponed or cancelled as a result of the pandemic. Among the largest annual events in the industry, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) is going ahead as scheduled in September, but with only 50 films—a fraction of the 250-plus screenings of previous years. Each of these will have a physically distanced premiere, with the rest being made available on electronic media, or in some cases at drive-in venues.

In an indication of studios' disregard for the health and safety of workers, now showing up in film production contracts are waivers such as the following:

"I am aware that participating in production activities involves... risks and dangers related to contracting COVID-19 or related virus... and agree that such risks and danger are unpredictable."

The irresponsible way film production is being resumed lays bare underlying class antagonisms and the overriding concerns of producers and distributors for profits over human life.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to two film workers about the impact of the coronavirus on the industry.

Nadine is a graphic artist working in the industry for the last five years. She said: "My work has been quite volatile since I started. Some of it I attribute to just being new in the industry and I was told from the veteran people that once you find new crews, you get more regular work.

"March 15, I think, is when the productions shut down. I had been on an August to March contract, so I was looking forward to taking some time off, but I did have prospects for other work. I'm a transient worker in and out of different areas and I have been doing some part-time work because I think you can make up to \$1,000 on the emergency benefit, and that's what I've been doing for the last month or so.

"It's really unclear what's happening with the film industry now. There's not a lot of information that's been given. I accepted a production, but I've been given no information on what safety protocols look like. I think IATSE sent something out, but the production itself hasn't sent out any sort of plan. So, I have no clue, and it's meant to start in the next month or so.

"I know they're making special exceptions for American actors to travel, so I am wondering if that's going to be the same policy adopted by Hollywood. If we're meant to be going into prep mode and the shooting schedule's established, where would there be time to go into quarantine unless they're doing it now without anyone's knowledge. If there is another outbreak, I don't know if it's something where they will declare another Force Majeure or if they would continue production and make adjustments.

"It's easier for me. I don't have a lot of living expenses like my colleagues on the coast. I don't have family, but my colleagues who do have all that are very much stressed out. Some of them are considering a total career change. I can't blame them there.

"The initial response of the union was very disorganized and secretive. They haven't really addressed it in a direct way until last week, when they sent out an email containing some workplace protocols. Outside of that, there's not a lot of communication and they're not willing to be forthright

with the changes in the industry and having any honest approach with what that looks like for workers.

"They just pretend like the industry is going to be back in full speed and it's going to be a very promising future. They're not willing to discuss if there are even cases, being accusatory even. I made a call myself and they were highly cynical. They were like, who are you, where do you work? Like I was a reporter looking for dirt, and I'm a member. They just suggested that people call the number that was set up, which you could never get a hold of anyone on."

Maria has worked in the film industry for the past 25 years and has a compromised immune system due to a battle with cancer and subsequent complications. She has recently returned to work as a buyer on a successful television series but expresses great concern and mixed feelings over the prospects.

"The guidelines are pretty general," she said. "For instance, they say disinfect everything that comes in like props or furniture. But there's no official word on how to do that without damaging those items. By official, I mean medical or scientific information.

"We have a coded rep and medical information officers who come in and talk to everybody, but it's just general information that you get: hand sanitize, wear masks, two meters distance, clean your surfaces. But when you're dealing with antiques, for instance, we don't know what the protocols are.

"They say they're cleaning them, but then they're getting handled and there just isn't enough information out there about this sort of stuff. Right now, all we can do is get things ahead of time so that they sit.

"We are not allowed to go anywhere near where the cast blocks or anything like that. We're not allowed to go in the studio space when they're shooting. There's a lot of physical limitations on where you can go. And you have to sort of jump through hoops or walk in circles to get from A to B because of that.

"It's all guesswork right now. We are all dealing with these disinfectants and you don't really know how much of that works against COVID.

"But how does it work in terms of your health being exposed to all these cleaners? That's something that hasn't been talked about in the media at all. We may be depleting our immune system just by disinfecting so much. Out of the frying pan into the fire."



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