

Hollywood production reaches “pre-pandemic levels”: What does that mean for film and television workers?

David Walsh
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FilmLA, the official film office of the City and County of Los Angeles, boasted on August 5 that film and television production in the second quarter of 2021 had reached and even surpassed “pre-pandemic levels.” This was the “best quarter since late 2019,” the organization reported, as television production in particular “continues to surge.”

The COVID-19 shutdown “sent filming levels crashing to record lows” in early 2020. Film and television production was entirely suspended in Los Angeles County between mid-March and mid-June 2020.

FilmLA explained that 9,791 “Shoot Days” were recorded across all categories in April-June of this year. Before the pandemic, the average number of Shoot Days recorded in a quarter was 9,135. This means that the “Q2 2021 activity bested the 2019 average quarterly by 7.2 percent.”

Moreover, film and television production in the second quarter surged from the first three months of 2021. In terms of Shoot Days, “quarterly production increased approximately 40 percent (from 7,011 SD to 9,791) since March. All of the four major categories tracked by FilmLA—Features, Commercials, Television and Other—experienced significantly increased activity. Leading the pack were Commercials, with a 55.5 percent increase over Q1 to 1,544 SD, followed by the Other category (up 49.7 percent to 2,510 SD), Features (up 43.3 percent to 824 SD) and Television (up 30.5 percent to 4,913 SD).”

FilmLA notes that television, “as Greater Los Angeles’ main production driver, remains important, and the TV Drama and TV Reality subgenres are largely responsible for the second quarter increase in production activity. Shoot days for TV Dramas (totaling 1,501) were up by 120.7 percent over their five-year quarterly average, and those for TV Reality (totaling 2,447) were up by 189.3 percent.” These numbers indicate a high degree of recklessness and selfishness.

Naturally, actors, crew members and everyone else in and around the film and television industry need jobs and

income. According to another report, Hollywood lost more than 110,000 jobs between December 2019 and December 2020, which spells enormous suffering, especially for those near the bottom of the totem pole.

President of FilmLA Paul Audley commented that by “almost any available measure, the second quarter was good for filming in Los Angeles. With local COVID-19 cases rising it’s not clear whether that will be sustainable, but the industry’s commitment to community, cast and crew safety remains firmly in place.” This is simply untrue. The industry has an unwavering commitment to profit.

The information reported by FilmLA, which will gladden the hearts of studio executives and large shareholders in the handful of conglomerates that dominate the industry, is not “good news” for those exposed, in order to earn a living, to the danger of infection. If the industry were shut down and everyone paid their full wages and benefits, which the billion-dollar corporations and the government could easily afford, until the pandemic was eradicated, that would be genuinely good news.

BuzzFeed News posted an article in December 2020 citing the comments of numerous television production members, “Torn Between Paychecks And Safety.” Speaking no doubt for a great many, a crew member at *The Voice* commented, “It just sucks that we’re all in this position, and you want to think that your employers are doing everything they can to keep you safe, but at the end of the day they’re big corporations like NBC and they just need to make their content, whether you’re safe or not.”

The worker responded with dismay to the news that the film and television industry had been declared “essential” by California Governor Gavin Newsom in November. “I’m very grateful to have a job and have these businesses figuring out how we can all still work, but it’s crazy to me that we’ve deemed TV ‘essential,’” the *Voice* crew member said. “With the numbers right now, we don’t need to be doing this. Let’s just shut down right now.”

How many film and television workers have been infected with COVID-19? Needless to say, neither the studios nor any level of government in California has been forthcoming about that.

In April 2021, the *New York Times* reported that “a year of struggle and experimentation for the television industry” has not “been without risk.” After television production restarted in the summer of 2020, “it had to be halted at times when stars fell ill or the virus ran rampant; in Los Angeles there have been 23 outbreaks at television and film production sites since July, leading to 187 cases, according to county health data.”

Deadline commented in January 2021 that the “unprecedented surge in coronavirus infections and deaths in Los Angeles County has prompted numerous TV shows to delay their return to production following the holiday hiatus.” The studios, *Deadline* noted, were “responding to an appeal by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, which urged the film and TV industry to consider pausing production for a few weeks during the ongoing surge in coronavirus cases throughout the county.” The website listed more than 40 television shows that had delayed the resumption of production.

The *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* reported on August 9 that five positive cases of COVID-19 were reported “among members of the production of ‘Love Island USA,’ a CBS reality TV show currently filming in Hilo, according to state Film Commissioner Donne Dawson.”

All the soothing words of government, industry and Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and other union officials don’t amount to a hill of beans. These people are playing with the lives of thousands of film and television industry workers under conditions of a deadly pandemic.

The WSWS warned about the risks of the resumption of film and television production in August 2020: “With the daily number of COVID-19 infections and deaths still climbing in some of the leading centers 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. ...

“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.” This warning was entirely correct.

The following month in September 2020, the WSWS explained, the various entertainment unions “reached a return-to-work agreement [with management] that will

expose entertainment industry workers to the COVID-19 contagion as television and film production resumes.” As the comment indicated, the “unions and companies are exploiting the precarious economic situation of entertainment workers to push through this deadly return to work.” The bitter experience of auto, meatpacking, health care and other workers showed that the various safety measures employed to justify reopening would inevitably be “abandoned to increase productivity and profits.”

In mid-July, officials of SAG-AFTRA, the Directors Guild of America, IATSE and the Teamsters, together with the Alliance of Motion Pictures and Television Producers (AMPTP), announced “a tentative agreement on adjustments to the COVID-19 Safety Agreement reflecting vaccines and other scientific advances.”

The modifications center, the unions asserted, “on workplace practices for fully vaccinated cast and crew, including changes to outdoor masking requirements and updated mealtime protocols. Producers will also have the option to implement mandatory vaccination policies for casts and crew in Zone A [the area where all filming activity takes place without protective equipment or social distancing] on a production-by-production basis.”

Other changes, “such as adjustments to testing frequency, are included for certain areas in the United States and Canada where COVID-19 incidence is, and remains, very low.” The agreement will remain in effect through September 30, 2021.

Revealingly, the SAG-AFTRA website observes that “the COVID-19 Safety Agreement is the outcome of unprecedented coordination and solidarity between the unions and collaboration with Employers to develop science-based protocols that minimize the risk of COVID-19 virus transmission in the industry’s unique work environments. Since that time, the protocols have driven a successful rebound of film and television production while prioritizing safety for casts, crews and all on-set workers.”

Whatever the vicissitudes of the pandemic, there is absolutely no reason to have confidence in such agreements. At every point, the union officials “solidarize” themselves with the predatory corporations that dominate Hollywood, renowned for their corruption and ruthlessness.



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