

Entertainment industry workers continue to work without a contract

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17 September 2021

Tens of thousands of entertainment industry workers, technicians, artisans and craftspersons on film and TV sets are continuing to work without a contract for months after the expiration of their old agreement as COVID-19 continues to spread.

The previous deal between the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) expired on July 31. The contract was extended until September 10, but that deadline came and went last Friday with no new agreement forthcoming, and the IATSE leadership simply told workers to keep reporting to work.

IATSE President Matthew Loeb said on Wednesday that negotiations had reached a “critical juncture,” and he sent out a letter to members stating, “We are united in demanding more humane working conditions across the industry, including reasonable rest during and between workdays and on the weekend, equitable pay on streaming productions, and a livable wage floor.”

Then on Thursday, Loeb said that after presenting their recent proposal on September 12, they have still not heard back from the AMPTP. He stated, “They have not submitted a counterproposal, though lines of communication remain open. The union remains committed to getting an acceptable contract that recognizes the value our highly skilled and experienced members bring to this industry, which includes addressing longstanding health and safety issues that have plagued our worksites for decades. Meanwhile, member mobilization is ongoing as we prepare for either a contract ratification or a strike authorization vote. You should continue to report to work. We will notify you as more information becomes available.”

The union even paused negotiations on the new contract in order to ratify new COVID-19 protocols

with management that require less testing, less social distancing and less sanitation requirements, thus lowering production costs for management and increasing the risk of disease and death for workers as the new lax protocols were signed off on despite the Delta variant surge.

At the same time, the IATSE falsely claimed to be ensuring the safety of their members when they signed onto the following statement, “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. ... The protocols have driven a successful rebound of film and television production while prioritizing safety for casts, crews and all on-set workers.”

The fact that workers have been operating without a contract for nearly two months and there still has not been a strike authorization vote, much less an actual strike, expresses the determination of the IATSE to accommodate AMPTP’s demands. In reality, there are no real “negotiations” taking place but strategy sessions between studio executives and the union over how to ram through a rotten deal.

One worker responded to Loeb’s remarks, “While I agree with IATSE’s main concerns, I am equally surprised no one is pointing out two things: 1) Matt Loeb has been head of IATSE since 2008. Why did he allow the working conditions and pension to decline to this level in the first place? 2) Unsafe hours and pension contributions were Cathy Repola’s (Editors Guild) main point of contention with the previous contract. Matt Loeb all but crucified her for speaking out. I’ll strike, but don’t have much faith in IATSE...”

The conditions which IATSE members endure are nothing short of terrible. They work upwards of 12 hours a day; some regularly work 16 hours a day. For many, the pay they receive leaves them officially rent-burdened in the city of Los Angeles, the main hub of the entertainment production. A survey done in February of this year showed that of 1,014 entertainment industry assistants, 79 percent of respondents made less than \$50,000 a year.

One commentator on social media pointed out that “Writers’ Assistants and Script Coordinators who graduate from UCLA film school can expect to earn a scale rate of \$16.00 and \$17.64, respectively. The In-N-Out in Westwood, meanwhile, starts new employees out at \$17.75.”

The Instagram account “ia_stories” has emerged as a forum where workers have been detailing some of their working conditions. One worker wrote: “I was so tired on my last shoot with 14 hour days and a 45 minute drive to and from set for a month, that I legit prayed I got covid so I could take a break and still have a job in two weeks. Those turnarounds and the commute was brutal. I almost fell asleep 2 times driving to work.”

IATSE workers have been laboring under these conditions for decades one sellout contract after another. But there could not be a better time to wage a struggle against the AMPTP than right now, due to the backlog of work that was created by the pandemic. According to Daniel Mitchell, Professor Emeritus at UCLA’s Anderson School of Management, “A strike threat that would impede production would be more effective from the union perspective now than in a more normal situation.” Precisely, last year all production was shut down.

For an actual struggle to be waged, IATSE members must seize the initiative from the leadership of the IATSE, whose top eight earners bring home a compensation package of over \$200,000. IATSE workers need to draw up a balance sheet of not only their recent contracts, but that of workers in other industries as well.

Workers will have to broaden the struggle by forming a rank-and-file committee, independent of IATSE, to formulate their own demands, share information, plan strategies and appeal to other sections of workers throughout Southern California and the US for support.



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