

Entertainment industry union IATSE calls for strike authorization vote

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The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the bargaining agent for 140,000 technicians, artisans and craftspersons in the media and entertainment industry, called for a strike authorization vote on September 20, ten days after an extension of the previous contract expired. The vote will be held October 1–3 and cover the 13 West Coast locals that belong to the Hollywood Basic Agreement.

The following day, September 21, IATSE President Matthew Loeb and the leaders of the 23 locals located outside Los Angeles, covered by the Area Standards Agreement, sent a letter to their members calling for a strike authorization vote, claiming that the Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers (AMPTP) had broken off negotiations by failing to respond to IATSE's last offer.

In a statement about the contract negotiations, IATSE officials asserted, "It is incomprehensible that the AMPTP, an ensemble that includes media mega-corporations collectively worth trillions of dollars, claims it cannot provide behind-the-scenes crews with basic human necessities like adequate sleep, meal breaks, and living wages. Worse, management does not appear to even recognize our core issues as problems that exist in the first place."

Conditions for below-the-line employees (crew members as opposed to script and story writers, producers, directors, actors and casting) have not only become intolerable, but they are also a danger to the health and safety of everyone on the set. Twelve-hour shifts are the norm and a majority of entertainment workers in Los Angeles are not earning a livable wage. Abuse is rampant, and breaks—if they are permitted—are too short and too infrequent. Workers complain they are being worked to death and that these conditions cannot continue.

The overwhelming sentiment of workers as it finds expression on social media is that change is urgently needed and that a strike is necessary. One worker, criticizing the union leadership, explained that Loeb "is the one that led us to this mess we are in. He alone said all the past contracts were great and we should ratify them. Now ... all of a sudden everything is wrong. That said ... if the producers can't agree on a basic human need of time off (10- or 12-hr turn around and proper meal breaks) it really says it all. ... Money and benefits are highly negotiable. The basic human necessities are not. For those alone I would vote [to] strike."

One worker on the *iatse_stories* Instagram site commented bitterly, "You know what's funny? The fact that we need to hear stories of 14–18 hour work days for people to be riled up. You know what's crazy? 12 hour days. The fact that this hardly sets off alarms shows how far we've normalized this work/life imbalance."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Elizabeth, who has been working in the business for two years. She began as a production assistant (PA) and then as an office PA before transitioning to her current position as a set decorator coordinator. She explained that when she worked as a PA, her shifts were normally from 14 to 17 hours a day. In six months, she only had two 12-hour shifts. She said, "Fatigue is a major issue, you have to stand all day, with only a half-hour break every six hours if you are lucky. Once we worked straight through without eating for an entire shift, but I did get the meal penalty pay, which is minimal."

She also stated that, like others whose stories have come out on the *iatse_stories* Instagram page, she had fallen asleep twice in her car because of the grueling schedule. Elizabeth said that even when a crew member is ill, it is hard to get time off. She said she was sick for

a week at the beginning of last year before her employers finally let her go home, and even then, it was only for two days. She also complained of abusive managers and rampant sexual harassment.

Elizabeth noted that the current project she is working on has so far been a good experience, but there was no guarantee that it would continue, or that the next project she works on would be the same. For that reason, she supports the strike authorization vote and would be very supportive of a strike if it occurs. “It’s good that they (IATSE), are taking a stand. The AMPTP does not want to even consider negotiating or changing anything.”

A warning must be issued. Matthew Loeb, IATSE president since 2008 and with a compensation package worth over \$500,000, along with the rest of the IATSE leadership, will not conduct a struggle to improve wages and working conditions. They will sabotage and betray such a struggle. They are fully responsible for the current miserable conditions, the product of a history of accepting concessions to the AMPTP, contract after contract.

Moreover, the union is only now calling a strike authorization vote, 10 days after the extension of the contract had expired and almost two months after the expiration of the original contract. This is an indication of how little appetite they have for a confrontation with the employers.

Loeb was well aware of the issues IATSE workers faced before the contract expired July 31 and yet did nothing to prepare workers for the impending conflict. Rather than calling for a strike authorization vote before the contract ended, the IATSE leaders opted to extend the contract, while pausing negotiations to implement a looser (and more dangerous) COVID-19 protocol under which the industry works.

While the Delta variant was already surging, IATSE helped the AMPTP reduce COVID-19 requirements, thereby allowing the employers to ramp up production and stock up on product in order to weather any possible strike.

The new COVID-19 protocols are set to expire on September 30. It is entirely possible that negotiations will be paused once again, so that the corporations can loosen restrictions one more time and further endanger the health and safety of IATSE workers. IATSE has not called attention to the rise of the Delta variant and the

death and destruction it has caused, or demanded the implementation of tighter restrictions or a suspension of production during which workers would have to receive full pay from the billion-dollar corporations.

Entertainment workers need to organize themselves democratically in rank-and-file committees and take the leadership in the struggle against the AMPTP. There has never been a better time for workers to engage in a fight against these corporate behemoths. The pandemic has caused massive delays in the production schedules of these corporations, and an immediate unified struggle against them will impact them greatly, but the longer they are allowed to keep production going, the longer they will be able to hold out during a strike, not to mention the human cost in the current conditions. Make the decision to form or join a rank-and-file committee today.



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