

IATSE movie and television workers vote overwhelmingly to strike

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Around 60,000 production workers in the movie and television industry voted to authorize strike action, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) announced on Tuesday. Over 90 percent of the membership turned out to vote, with 98.6 percent voting in favor of a strike.

As if on cue, within hours of the announcement of the results of the strike vote, both IATSE and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) announced they would be resuming negotiations on Tuesday, October 4, after a two-month hiatus brought on by the renegotiation of the COVID-19 protocols just as the Delta variant was surging across California and the country as a whole.

Those loosened protocols, which were set to expire on September 30, were further extended until the end of October, according to management, though the union leadership stated that there was merely a “tacit agreement” to extend them.

When the studios wanted to make it easier to carry out production work by loosening the restrictions in place to keep workers safe during a global pandemic, IATSE not only agreed, but they put the contract negotiations on hold to do so, and gave the AMPTP a two-month extension. During that time, IATSE claims that AMPTP refused their last offer and refused to come back to the table, yet they waited.

IATSE President Matthew Loeb and the rest of the leadership waited to hold a strike authorization vote until over two weeks after the extension of the original contract expired. This delay took place even after the AMPTP said that they wanted to more than double the number of hours required yearly before IATSE members can qualify for the pension.

After the announcement of the results of the strike vote, the AMPTP said that it “remains committed to

reaching an agreement that will keep the industry working. We deeply value our IATSE crew members and are committed to working with them to avoid shutting down the industry at such a pivotal time, particularly since the industry is still recovering from the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic. A deal can be made at the bargaining table, but it will require both parties working together in good faith with a willingness to compromise and to explore new solutions to resolve the open issues.”

In response to this statement, one worker had this to say: “We deeply value our IATSE crew members’—just not enough to guarantee a humane lunch hour. Or humane working hours. Or to admit that streaming services aren’t ‘new media’ and haven’t been for a really long time. But yeah, we deeply value you all! But pity the poor Hollywood producers. It’s been a rough year for them with covid. They’re only pulling in billions of dollars of profit. How dare IATSE ask for humane conditions! Now’s not the right time. Next time. Next time. Next time. Say it with us now, ‘Next time.’ Pity these poor Hollywood producers, most of whom identify as liberals. Who ‘like’ posts on Facebook from Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Who virtue signal with a retweeted AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] story. Pity them for they know in their hearts of hearts that they’re corporate shills, doing the bidding of their overlords to drain the life out of the middle and working classes.”

Immediately after the vote, Loeb stated: “The ball is in their court. If they want to avoid a strike, they will return to the bargaining table and make us a reasonable offer.” Asking for a reasonable offer from the AMPTP is an open signal that the IATSE leadership is more than willing sacrifice workers’ demands, which include an end to excessively unsafe and harmful working

hours, a livable wage for the lowest paid workers, reasonable rest during meal breaks, between workdays and on weekends, and equitable pay and conditions for those working on “new media” or streaming projects.

IATSE workers voted to strike for the first time in its 128-year history because the conditions to which they are subjected are untenable, including constant 12-16 hour days, no rest, no sleep and poverty wages.

One worker, commenting on a statement from someone in management, replied: “I’m sure that 2nd (walking) meal of cold pizza that you approved from your tower office sounds delicious. It’s not. Neither is the cereal I’m going to have for dinner when I get home from my 17 hour day. Cereal because I only have an 8 hour turn around and I don’t have to time to cook. Also because I haven’t had time to shop for groceries since it’s my 4th 17 hour day in a row.”

After the resumption of negotiations was announced, Loeb said: “The members have spoken loud and clear. This vote is about the quality of life as well as the health and safety of those who work in the film and television industry. Our people have basic human needs like time for meal breaks, adequate sleep, and a weekend. For those at the bottom of the pay scale, they deserve nothing less than a living wage.”

If Loeb and the rest of the IATSE leadership were truly interested or if they truly cared about the health and safety of their membership, they would not have agreed to a loosening of the COVID-19 protocols as the Delta variant was surging, nor would they “tacitly” agree to extend those loosened protocols while they were attempting to negotiate a new contract. Nor would they have recommended the membership to vote yes on the previous contract, or the one before, the conditions under which the leadership now admits are intolerable. Loeb, who takes home a yearly compensation package of more than \$500,000, has been sitting atop the union and every negotiation since 2008.

The pandemic and the associated slowing down of production that it entailed left IATSE workers with more bargaining power than ever. However, each day that production is allowed to continue squanders this opportunity weakens the effects of any future strike activity by giving the producers breathing space to wait out any possible strike.

Workers are angry, united and determined to fight for livable working conditions and wages; the resounding,

nearly unanimous vote in favor of a strike points to their resiliency. However, if the struggle against Hollywood and the streaming studios is to be successful, the struggle needs to be taken out of the hands of the IATSE leadership and put under the democratic control of workers organized in a rank-and-file committee.



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