

IATSE leadership prepares betrayal of entertainment industry workers

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Just days after workers voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike authorization, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) has demonstrated its readiness to grant a major concession to the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). IATSE stated that it is now seeking a turnaround time of just 10 hours between shifts, brushing aside workers' demands for a maximum 12-hour workday.

With more than 90 percent of the membership of about 60,000 voting, 98.6 percent voted to authorize a strike.

The IATSE leadership claimed the vote forced a recalcitrant AMPTP to return to the negotiation table in a bid to avoid an impending strike. However, IATSE used the resumption of talks to hand over a significant concession to management, reportedly agreeing to accept 14-hour shifts as opposed to the pre-strike authorization vote demand of 12-hour shifts.

According to *Variety*, the business agent of Local 487, David O'Ferrall, said the AMPTP were now amenable to accepting 10-hour turnaround times between shifts, but said nothing about the previous demand for 12-hour shifts. Rather, to disguise the IATSE's backdown, he stated that, "The AMPTP is pushing back to see where they can create cracks, but the IA sentiment is to bargain hard and get what we are due."

In what sort of bargaining are they engaging? What worker is due a 14-hour shift even once, much less on a regular basis? The union has demonstrably caved on one of the central demands, within hours of returning to the negotiating table from a position of strength, without bothering to offer an explanation to the membership.

Workers voiced their disgust on the IATSE Facebook page. One worker wrote, "12 on 12 off seems so simple," when he learned about the IATSE cave in on a 12-hour day. A number of IATSE members expressed disbelief, while the anger of others was palpable, as with one worker who commented, "My great grandpa didn't knife

a scab so we could have only a 10-hour turnaround."

A few workers were worried that their already low pay would be impacted by shorter hours, however others pointed to the falseness of this line of reasoning with the succinct statement, "Pay us enough to live on straight time alone, for starters."

Workers' resolve to oppose intolerable conditions is unwavering. In the face of IATSE pro-corporate toadies who profess that nothing can be done, or this is "the way things have always been," workers have spoken out and shown their determination to fight.

No faith, however, can be placed in the leadership of IATSE to carry forward the demands of the workers. Within hours it has shown its willingness to abandon workers' demands without courtesy of an explanation. Why did Matthew Loeb, President of IATSE, cave in on one of workers' major demands just as they returned to the table from a position of unparalleled strength? The answer is simple, the IATSE leadership never had any intention of fighting for workers' demands.

The fact is that in the 128-year history of IATSE, the union has never carried out a single strike, a fact of which management is well aware and the reason they can proceed with such confidence and arrogance.

Indeed, last weekend's strike authorization vote was the first in IATSE history. IATSE first formed in 1893 in New York with representatives from eleven cities. During the 1930s and 40s, IATSE was led by organized crime: President George Browne took orders from Al Capone's top henchman Frank Nitti and formed a criminal alliance with gangster Willie Bioff.

During the 1934 IATSE leadership elections, at the height of mass labor struggles in the US, armed gangsters in every major city compelled IATSE members to vote "properly," for George Browne. During court testimony, Willie Bioff admitted that he extorted film company executives on behalf of IATSE to the tune of millions of

dollars in exchange for “labor peace,” i.e., making sure workers would submit to the studios’ demands.

The last major strike against Hollywood studios took place in 1945-46. The walkout was led by the militant Conference of Studio Unions headed by Herbert Sorrell. IATSE organized its members to cross picket lines and helped the major studios smash the strike with the assistance of the Screen Actors Guild, headed at the time by Ronald Reagan. Their scabbing actions enabled the blacklisting and the destruction of the CSU and the emergence of the right-wing IATSE as the dominant force at Hollywood studios.

Loeb, who has a compensation package in excess of \$500,000, has overseen IATSE since 2008 and is directly responsible for present conditions. As stated above, the fact that this is the first-ever strike authorization demonstrates the complete subservience of IATSE to studio management.

This so-called labor organization has agreed to contracts that allow studios to keep employees on the set for up 18 hours a day, six days a week; that allows companies to keep workers on their feet the entire time with no meal breaks, only having to pay a small penalty, (for which the studios budget); that allows studios to pay wages that are below those paid in the fast-food industry and studio bosses to randomly mistreat and abuse employees and to essentially rob workers of their lives.

On Friday, Thom Davis, IATSE Second International Vice President, said that “Your Union is committed to continue to negotiate to get the contract that our members deserve, but we cannot, and will not allow the employers to just drag out the process without meaningful and real movement on their part. At some point a decision will be made on whether the negotiations are moving well enough to continue the talks, or whether it is time to act. Are we at that point yet? NO, we are not. Will the employers be allowed to string us along? NO.”

Davis must think he is speaking to fools who cannot see what is before their eyes. The contract expired at the end of July, and IATSE granted the AMPTP an extension, which ran out on September 10. The contract expired while stricter COVID-19 protocols were in place and right at the end of one of the most expansive slowdowns of production in the history of the industry with demand never being greater.

Given the conditions that workers were operating under, why was a strike authorization vote not taken before the contract ran out? Why were the contract negotiations put on hold so that the COVID-19 protocols could be

loosened, and production ramped up? And why was the AMPTP given a “tacit agreement” to the extension of those relaxed COVID-19 protocols, given the surge of the Delta variant that is ravaging California? One could ask of Davis, when will IATSE stop allowing AMPTP to string workers along.

According to *Deadline*, at the end of negotiations on Friday, Loeb proclaimed a deal or a strike was days, not weeks away. Considering the negotiating record of Loeb and IATSE both before and during the current contract negotiations, workers should take Loeb’s words as a threat that a concessionary contract is being prepared behind the backs of workers. As with the experience of autoworkers and many others, workers can expect to be asked to vote based on receiving only highlights that will not reflect the actual contents of the agreement.

While workers are resolved to fight, some may have illusions that the leadership of IATSE will carry their struggle with the entertainment conglomerates forward. Nothing could be further from the truth. In response to the union’s empty bombast a worker stated, “Blah blah blah...I have seen this movie a hundred times ... all this posturing and shenanigans will come to whimpering end with my spineless IATSE once again assuming the position and taking it ... I will wager my eternal soul to be cast down to hell that there will be no work stoppage or strike and that we IATSE members will be fed a bowl of warm bull**** by our, ahem, leaders.”

If this is not to happen, workers must make the decision now to take the leadership of their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats and put it under their own democratic control by forming rank-and-file committees. Now is the time for workers to take a stand against the miserable pay and conditions that have been imposed through the collaboration of IATSE. If the struggle is to be successful, it cannot be left in the hands of the union sellouts. Rank-and-file committees will allow workers to democratically formulate their own demands, share information, and link the struggle of film and entertainment industry workers with broader sections of workers across the US and globally.



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