

Huge opposition from television and movie workers as union calls off strike and pushes sellout deal

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The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) called off a strike by more than 60,000 television and movie workers, which was set to begin at 12:01 am Monday October 18, with an announcement that union officials had reached a “landmark” deal on Saturday with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) on the Basic and Videotape Agreements. “This is a Hollywood ending,” IATSE President Matthew Loeb said in the press release. “Our members stood firm. We are tough and united.”

Mike Miller, Vice President and Director of the Motion Picture and TV Department for IATSE, stated in the press release that “Our members will see significant improvements, but our employers also will benefit.” Trying to explain why workers should care about the benefits the giant entertainment firms will gain from pitilessly exploiting them, Miller continued, “This settlement allows pre-production, production and post-production to continue without interruption. Workers should have improved morale and be more alert. Health and safety standards have been upgraded.”

Workers voted by 98 percent in favor of a strike and were determined to overturn years of declining living standards and longer and longer working days from the fabulously profitable studios, which have forced workers to labor under crushing levels of mandatory overtime during the pandemic with little if any protections.

According to IATSE, the deal includes a 3 percent annual pay raise (a de facto cut in real pay given the current 5.4 percent annual inflation rate), ten-hour turnarounds between shifts and 54-hour “weekends,” ie., 54 hours off between the end of the workweek Friday night to the beginning of the workweek Monday morning. This would be reduced to 32 hours off in a six-day workweek.

The proposal also reportedly includes the addition of the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday and unspecified increases in meal penalties, which are paid when work rolls into meal

breaks. In addition, the union made amorphous claims that the lowest-paid workers would begin receiving a “livable wage,” and that there would be “improved working conditions and wages” for streaming and the adoption of inclusion and diversity initiatives.

The deal does nothing to seriously address anger over low pay that fails to keep up with skyrocketing living expenses and the endless imposition of mandatory overtime, including what workers call “Fratursdays,” ie., the routine practice of extending work into the weekends, leaving workers with little or no time off.

Within hours of the announcement of the tentative agreement (TA), there was an outpouring of outrage from workers on social media and union locals’ phone lines denouncing the betrayal and calling for an unequivocal ‘no’ vote on the contract.

Among the over 150 comments recorded in the first few hours after the union released news of the deal on Twitter was one from a worker who expressed the universal desire of having a life outside of work. “This is a standard negotiation that doesn’t address what we want. Many of these things are already in many contracts. We don’t want to work OT to make enough money. We don’t want prevailing meal penalties. We want to eat. We want to have a life outside of work. Period.”

In reference to Loeb previously stating that the contract was over “human rights,” one worker said, “What happened to giving us basic human rights? Guess we’ll just keep eating over trash cans.”

While yet another responded angrily: “You sold us out. How do you sleep at night? The agreement is s**t! Why don’t you try doing our jobs under these conditions and then tell us we are lucky to maintain the status quo? We had the support of the nation and film industry workers all over the world and you caved!”

The IATSE public Facebook page was much the same, with one worker sarcastically posting, “If I’m understanding

the information coming out, this deal only allows productions to work their crew up to 86 hours a week. Sounds like a great leap toward improving working conditions to me.”

On Reddit thread r/IATSE, one worker demonstrated his disgust by contrasting the wage increases workers got with the salary bumps IATSE President Matt Loeb has gotten for years. “3% is not the best Matt can do apparently,” he wrote next to a chart showing that Loeb has had a 6.2 percent average annual pay raise as President of IATSE since 2008 and before that an annual pay raise of 5.7 percent as vice president. Loeb pocketed a whopping \$530,000 in 2019.

The same reaction could be found on all social media platforms as well as in the comment sections of articles on IATSE and the TA. While IATSE workers have historically turned out in low numbers, (20 to 30 percent, according to an IndieWire article from 2018), over 90 percent of workers turned out for the near unanimous vote to authorize a strike. A good many have already taken the measure of the current IATSE leadership with calls already appearing to have them replaced.

Television and movie production workers should be organizing now to defeat the sellout contract and to join the growing number of workers throughout the US and the world who are striking to demand substantial wage increases, a sharp reduction in work time and the reversal of decades of union-backed concessions. This will require the building of new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file workplace committees, to take the conduct of the fight out of the hands of IATSE and the AFL-CIO.

There is little doubt that IATSE’s effort to block a strike has been coordinated with the national AFL-CIO and the Biden administration, which is confronting a growing strike wave against skyrocketing food, fuel and other living expenses and grueling work hours. Since the beginning of October alone, strikes have begun by 10,100 workers at agricultural and construction equipment manufacturer Deere, 1,400 Kellogg’s food-processing workers, and 2,000 nurses in Buffalo, New York in what commentators are calling “Striketober.” More than 3,500 workers at auto parts producer Dana are pressing for strike action after rejecting a contract pushed by the United Auto Workers and the United Steelworkers by 90 percent, and 40,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers are gearing up to strike over dangerous understaffing and low pay.

The strike wave, the largest in generations, is rattling Wall Street and threatening to overturn decades of union-backed concessions that have led to a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the corporate and financial elite. The artificial suppression of wages, carried out with the collusion of the unions, allowed the central banks to pour

limitless financial resources into the banks and corporations and inflate the stock market. The artificial inflation of financial assets and the wealth of the ruling class, which was escalated with the multitrillion-dollar bipartisan CARES Act, have poured into every section of the economy. Workers are fighting for a substantial increase in wages to keep up with a relentless rise in living expenses.

As the WSWS pointed out last week, “More broadly, expressed in the eruption of class struggle is anger that has built up over four decades of relentless assaults on living standards and the corresponding growth of staggering levels of social inequality. The already colossal wealth of US billionaires increased by \$1.8 trillion during the pandemic to \$4.8 trillion as of August of this year.”

The Biden administration is doing everything it can to prop up the unions as a labor police force to suppress the class struggle and divert social anger behind the White House’s increasingly aggressive calls for trade war and military confrontation with China. But opposition is erupting everywhere against the corporatist trade unions, which are run by affluent executives whose interests are completely hostile to the workers they claim to “represent.”

Film and TV entertainment workers must take a lead from other sections of workers, including Deere, Dana and other manufacturing workers, educators and other sections of workers, who have begun to form rank-and-file workplace committees, completely independent of the pro-company unions.

Workers are dying from the sacrifice of human life to corporate profit during the pandemic and are having their lives crushed by the studios with the help of IATSE, and it is time to put a stop to it. That will not be done by replacing one union boss with another. Workers need to take the initiative themselves and organize democratically into rank-and-file committees to take the leadership of the struggle with the media conglomerates into their own hands. We urge all IATSE members to contact the WSWS for assistance in building rank-and-file committees.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact