

Film and television workers denounce IATSE sellout during union town hall meeting

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The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) held a three-hour-long town hall meeting Tuesday, October 19, to try to sell its tentative agreement (TA) with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). IATSE officials announced the last-minute deal on Saturday, blocking a strike by 60,000 film and television production workers that was set to begin Sunday night.

More than a thousand workers attended the virtual town hall meeting. IATSE officials faced a torrent of opposition from rank-and-file workers angered over the fact that the deal for a new three-year contract ignored their demands for substantially improved wages to offset the rising cost of living and an end to dangerous and exhausting levels of overtime.

Chairing the meeting was Tobey Bays, business agent at Local 44, an influential IATSE branch in Los Angeles that since 1939 has negotiated the most egregious concessions made to the AMPTP in the very heart of the entertainment capital. At least 6,200 highly skilled workers, from construction coordinators to drapers, prop masters, propmakers, set decorators, special effects, and more, are bound by the agreements negotiated by this local alone. In total, 60,000 film and tv workers will be affected by the new agreement nationwide.

The arrogance of the IATSE officials leading the meeting highlighted the enormous gap between the affluent union executives and the tens of thousands of workers in the union who struggle from paycheck to paycheck. Co-chairing the meeting with Bays (2020 salary \$258,772) were Secretary Treasurer Anthony Pawluc (\$217,838) and Business Representative David Elliot (\$175,518). Business Agent Victor Reyes (\$172,578) and Assistant Business Agent Angela Whiting (\$170,368) handled the Q&A.

Bays reviewed the so-called “improvements” in the deal, including a meager 3 percent raise under conditions

of an annual inflation rate of 5.4 percent. Local 871 members in Los Angeles will see a raise from a poverty level of \$16.50 an hour to \$26.00 by the third year. This will leave workers in dire straits in a city where the average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$2,648, according to *rent.com*, and utilities average \$185 a month.

There were token increases in wages for episodic, mini-series, long-form and low-budget streaming so that residuals and royalties would remain off the table. IATSE made that concession years ago at the beginning of streaming, promising that it would be revisited if anything came of streaming, which has become a major source of income for Disney, Paramount, NBC (Peacock) and other media giants.

Union officials said the employers would pay into the IATSE National Benefits Funds—the health and pension plan—for the next three years. However, there will be no improvements in members’ benefits, only a promise not to reduce benefits. The funding will be limited to three years, posing the danger of insufficient funding in the future and benefit cuts. Some retirees will be able to keep their 13th and 14th pension check but will not receive any increases. On-call employees will receive a small increase in employer contributions to their pension and health plan. Given the precarious nature of on-call employment, however, this was virtually a meaningless concession for the AMPTP.

On working conditions, IATSE officials said workers would get 54 hours of rest after five workdays or 32 hours after six workdays. However, several exceptions and loopholes remain that will ensure the workers get even less rest. Meal penalties were slightly adjusted to accommodate AMPTP’s routine practice of cutting into a worker’s meal breaks to continue production. Moreover, the infamous 10-hour turnaround remains in force, allowing the continuation of 14-hour workdays.

When the floor was opened for questions and comments, rank-and-file workers denounced the IATSE bureaucrats for blocking a strike and abandoning their demands. “You guys shut everything down,” a prop shop worker said. “It would have been beneficial if you had allowed the strike to happen or given us a few days to review this before we ever said ‘yeah, no strike.’” He said a one-week strike would have made AMPTP think about what it would “cost them if they didn’t play ball.”

The worker criticized the union for allowing streamers to get away with not paying residuals, since the product would have to be distributed through secondary market (non-streamer) for workers to be eligible for royalties and residuals.

“We gave them a discount to get streaming off the platform, now it’s profitable and we still...after now 12 years...haven’t removed the new media label on this experimental project? We still don’t have any language saying in two years this experiment is over and we’re going full rate. You guys are negotiating on our behalf, we’re carrying the heavy load and they’re getting away with it.”

A property master pointed to the vulnerability of the pension fund. While the union had originally committed to gaining residuals to help with pension solvency, she commented, “It moved from the possibility of additional streaming revenues to direct employer contributions. When and why did that happen in the room and how does that affect our pensions moving forward?” The reality is that the union allowed AMPTP to get away with not paying residuals in exchange of a one-cycle contribution.

Bays responded arrogantly. “The goal was not to get a strike: the goal was to get the best deal we could get.” He added, “Strikes are dangerous,” without saying to whom. There is no doubt that the IATSE leadership, working with the AFL-CIO and the Biden administration, blocked a strike because it did not want television and film workers to join the growing strike wave in the US, which poses danger to the corporatist relations between the unions, big business and both corporate-backed parties.

A property master reacted to Bays’s insistence about the danger of a strike. “What leads you to believe that we would lose a strike, since, in the last 85 years, we haven’t had a giant one? We gave you a 98 percent vote!” She continued: “If this is the best contract we ever had, when was the last time we’ve seen gains? Why would you possibly think that in three years, when they are richer, have more layers, we are going to do better in that room?”

When Bays again tried to argue that a strike hurts

people, the worker responded angrily and passionately, saying, “People are dying! We lost an AD [assistant director] because he couldn’t take a single second away from his show. He dropped dead from a heart attack. So, does it matter if I’m losing my pension if I’m not going to make it to 65? People are not sleeping. You are not seeing people sleeping on sets, I am! Everybody in this union sees it!” At this point, they muted her microphone, to the shock of other workers.

Another worker criticized IATSE President Matt Loeb’s smug remark that the outcome of the negotiations was like a “Hollywood ending.” Instead, the worker said, “It was like a gut punch because everybody on my crew feels like we came up short in our basic needs. The general mood is extremely negative. Why give up the opportunity [when we had] the maximum amount of leverage?” He concluded by saying “I think there’s a gap between what the perceived outcome was and the reality on the floor.”

Union officials have not released the date of the ratification vote, but it is clear they will spend the next period trying to beat back the enormous resistance of workers. IATSE also has a byzantine ratification process, similar to the US electoral college system, through which it could ram through the sellout deal even though a majority of members vote against it.

Workers must draw the lessons of this and decades of previous betrayals and take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, should mobilize the ranks for the largest “no” vote possible and to demand immediate strike action. These committees should reach out to educators, health care, logistics, manufacturing and other workers, and to union and non-union media workers throughout the world to prepare a common struggle for substantial improvements in wages and conditions and against the domination of the entertainment industry by the capitalist conglomerates.



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