"They literally treated a dog with more humanity than their crew members"

Film and television workers expose oppressive conditions in entertainment industry

Alan Gilman, Marc Wells
24 October 2021

Mass opposition and anger continue to mount amongst film and television workers as more details emerge about the Tentative Agreement (TA) between the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which was reached on October 16.

The TA was reached hours before IATSE was to begin its first nationwide strike in its 128-year history. The scheduled strike by 60,000 film and television production workers had been massively supported by the rank and file who had voted by 98 percent to authorize the strike. IATSE President Matthew Loeb preserved the union's unblemished no-strike record by announcing a last-minute deal, which he declared was "a Hollywood ending."

IATSE has not yet set a date for a ratification vote and instead hopes that by delaying a vote the widespread opposition will dissipate. The tragic shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and the wounding of director Joel Souza during Thursday's filming of the movie *Rust* in New Mexico—which would never have happened if the strike had been launched—will bring greater attention to intolerable working conditions and fuel further opposition to the sellout agreement.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Cory and Norma, who have worked in the film industry for decades.

Cory has worked as a key grip for over twenty years. Grips run and maintain all the equipment on the set that has to do with cameras, having to be proficient at utilizing tripods, dollies, tracks, jibs and cranes. Because of the pandemic, Cory stopped working as a grip and has pursued work in another field. Because of this, he felt he could express the views of many workers who might otherwise fear being blacklisted for speaking out.

"I'm a fourth generation, so I've seen what this industry can provide for families but I also see what we've lost since 1996 and how our leadership and our negotiators have failed us every single time, time and time again. "We haven't struck in a hundred years, and they squandered that opportunity to finally tell the producers, 'No, we are one, we are united.' Because now what they get to do is un-unite us. Each one of the locals is now going to have to vote on the contract, so all they have to do, just like the presidential election, is just get key, high-populated unions to majority vote 'yes,' and more than likely they have enough delegates to get the agreement passed.

"They divided all the unions across—in Georgia, they have [IATSE Local] 479, they have one local and represent a lot of different technicians and mechanics, and different trades. In California, we have Local 80, Local 728, Local 444, Local 700, Local 600—there's, I don't know, let's say 14-15 different locals in California, so now we're all divided, so now we're all fighting amongst each other, not rooting for each other.

And then if we have more members than they do, all we've got to do is vote 52 percent and our delegates all vote 'yes,' there's no way that three of our unions could even compete with us because we have more delegates than them.

"The whole thing is set up as a scam. I call it—most people do—a producers union. IATSE is owned by the producers, they're run by the producers, and we're just their Guinea Pigs. Again, they are liberals and Democrats, when they're anything but liberals in how they treat their workers and how they treat their contracts."

Cory described the conditions that he and his colleagues have to endure while on the set. "I've been on the set in Louisiana where we were working it was literally 112 degrees out and it's like a 100 in humidity. There's a dog on set. The animal society came up and called the shot because the dog couldn't work under those conditions. And, without even missing a beat, the director took us to the next shot and said there's not a dog in that one, we can work on that one then. They literally treated a dog with more humanity than their crew members.

"This job is *tough.* When the industry first went to Louisiana, I was there in 2007, we couldn't find someone to stay more than eight hours. The locals there had no idea what the film industry was, and it took a lot of people moving from LA to Louisiana just to have the workforce out there. And the same

© World Socialist Web Site

thing has happened with Georgia. It's a different breed of person that can actually be—it's almost like a circus person. There are only certain people that can live like that and function like that.

"Go look at the average life of a grip after he retires. He doesn't even make it to his fourth year of retirement payments before he dies. His body is so broken down and battered, his spirit is gone, and he's literally had so many sleepless nights where they literally die after retirement. To me, that's just wrong. I can be in this industry for 20 years and literally never be hired again because I'm too slow or my knees are broken, my hips are bad—and I never get to work again. And it's like, I just gave 20 years of my life to not get hired, lose my medical, and then I'm a 60-year-old guy, like how am I going to survive?

"Obviously there are many stories like this. There is no job security—I have been fired, and there's lots of people who have been fired for being five minutes late to work. You have a 10 am call in downtown LA, it's hard to judge if it's going to take me two hours or three hours to get there. I am five minutes late and I get fired.

"In 1996, we had night premiums and weekend pay to discourage the employer from working us in the nights. If you were working a night shot, you can't work Tuesday and Wednesday, you can only work that one day, so you got paid extra to [equal] those two days of pay. We lost those. We don't have those anymore. So that's why they work us 12, 14, 16 hours a day: because they don't give a shit because you're not getting paid triple time anymore."

Cory was particularly critical of the Democrats and their liberal hypocrisy.

"Why is it that someone in California makes $10-15 more an hour than someone doing the exact same job in Georgia for the exact same producers? It's not like it's a company out there that's not bringing in as much revenue. These are huge corporations doing huge movies and because they decided to go out to Georgia for the tax cut, they get a wage cut from these people. It doesn't make any sense.

"They say they are liberals and Democrats, but you are doing the exact opposite of what you are preaching. You are literally exploiting the worker so you can make more money. You are using tax cuts—which you say you are against these big billionaires getting tax cuts, but you are literally giving them tax cuts just to do movies. They're not saving the world. They're creating movies. There are very few good movies that make an actual difference in someone's life. That just makes no sense to me."

Norma has worked in props (property) for 24 years and now is in set dressing. She expressed her strong opposition to the Tentative Agreement and was particularly upset that, despite the massive profits of the AMPTP, the workers are not receiving any of it:

"After we read in all the trades and here in the news that they are making record profits year after year, and this pandemic has opened the eyes of IATSE leadership to things that membership has been talking about for years. I don't blame the AMPTP, this is what they do. They recently made deals with above-the-line crafts that are the exact same kind of asks that we're asking. Television and box office get 9 percent residuals on those monies. Our deal with streaming is terrible; we need parity in getting monies from a piece of the product we helped to create, just like we get from television and features. This is not an extraordinary ask."

When asked why IATSE is not representing the class interests of the workers that it claims to represent, Norma responded, "Have you seen their salaries? We're in a different class. They've lost touch with the needs of the membership." (IATSE President Matthew Loeb made $491,141 in 2020, according to filing with the US Labor Department). "We are not going to accept a deal that does not meet sustainable benefits, reasonable rest, and fair and equitable pay. They made those talking points. They need to fulfill their duty as our employees to go get what we're asking for.

"All of us love doing our job. We want to make product, we do, we just want to share in the profits of that product. We need to be safe. The reason I no longer work in props on set anymore is because I fell asleep so many times behind the wheel and it was a miracle that I did not end up wrapped around a tree or killing somebody else."

Norma went on to add that those conditions were created by the negotiations that have proceeded this one. In 24 years, she said, "I have not voted 'yes' to a single contract. Not one."

Referring to the IATSE officials and the Hollywood executives, Norma said, "A huge part of the problem is that these people rub elbows with the same fundraisers every year and they are friends."

Norma was also aware of the sordid history of IATSE. "Yeah, that IATSE came to Hollywood to put down the set decorators strike in the '40s, and then there was the Mafia in the '30s."

Norma was fully aware of the strike wave sweeping the country, dubbed "Striketober."

"Yup everyone, everywhere. Farm workers had a sign in the field that said, 'Your fight about IATSE is our fight.' That's right, our fight is their fight, their fight is our fight. It's exactly the same fight. John Deere, Starbucks, Kaiser workers, everyone, same exact fight."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site