

With opposition mounting to sellout deal, IATSE officials call for “unity”

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With opposition mounting to its proposed agreement with TV and film producers, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) issued a press release October 28 calling for “unity” and “solidarity,” and reiterating its support for a tentative agreement, which ignores workers’ demands for shorter working hours, higher pay and adequate funding for health and pension benefits.

The decision by the IATSE leadership to prevent a strike by 60,000 film and TV production workers and agree to a last-minute deal provoked enormous anger among rank-and-file workers. Opposition became firmer after the tragic death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins on October 21, in an accidental shooting at a New Mexico film set, which highlighted the unsafe conditions prevalent in the industry.

In a statement signed by IATSE President Matthew Loeb and leaders of all 13 Hollywood Studio locals, they insist the deal was “the best agreement possible after these many months of negotiations” and declare, “We stand united in recommending a Yes vote on this agreement.”

After claiming that “thousands of members” are supporting the deal, the IATSE bureaucrats acknowledge the widespread opposition to their deal, saying, “To those of you opposed—we hear you, we see you, and we recognize we collectively still have work to do to change the culture of our industry. We ask you to stand with us as we move forward.

“Our future success,” it continues, “will depend on our ability to stay united rather than being divided. That only serves our employers. Let’s move forward together and take ownership in advocating for the long overdue cultural change needed in this industry. It doesn’t stop here, and in fact, it has just begun. We are committed to doing this work together. This contract is only one of the tools we have at our disposal. Ultimately our solidarity is more powerful than any words on paper could ever be.”

What hypocrisy! While saying “we hear you,” the affluent union executives (Loeb pocketed \$494,141 last year) have denounced workers who oppose their sweetheart deal, saying this “only serves our employers.” But it is Loeb & Co. “who serve” the Hollywood producers, not the workers

who are determined to fight them. “The words on paper” signed by IATSE will guarantee the further erosion of workers’ living standards and working conditions and guarantee more tragic accidents.

In an apt comment following the statement on the IATSE Facebook page, one worker wrote: “Quit treating us like children. The level of disrespect and disregard that has come from the international and local leadership this cycle is practically unfathomable. You work for US. Learn YOUR place and quit telling us what to do with our votes and undermining our decisions when we DO vote.”

It is time for workers to draw a balance sheet of what IATSE has “achieved” in these contract negotiations and indeed, in previous negotiations as well.

Negotiations began in May, with no agreement being reached by the end of the contract on July 31 and an extension agreed to until September 10. Meanwhile, IATSE and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) renegotiated and loosened the COVID-19 protocols.

Several days after the extension expired, IATSE finally called for a strike authorization vote, which was scheduled another two weeks in advance. All this time, the Hollywood moguls not only continued production, but the rate of exploitation was intensified exponentially to generate enough content to outlast any potential strike.

Despite a strike vote obtaining an historic turnout of over 90 percent of the membership, with 98.6 percent voting in favor, the IATSE leaders immediately began working to block a strike. They falsely claimed that they had forced the mighty AMPTP to their knees and achieved major gains, including 10-hour turnarounds between shifts, even though this ignored workers’ minimum demand of at least 12-hour turnarounds.

Workers began taking to social media in droves, denouncing the leadership in no uncertain terms. The massive turnout and overwhelming support for strike action by workers took the IATSE leadership entirely by surprise and consequently delayed the announcement of the already

worked out “landmark” TA by another two weeks, at which time they proclaimed the rotten deal a “Hollywood ending.” At the point where workers were ready to strike and increase their leverage, IATSE gave it away, called off the strike and sealed a deal with AMPTP.

When Loeb and the rest of the leadership claimed in the October 28 statement that “Our future success will depend on our ability to stay united rather than being divided,” they must think that workers cannot add two and two together. Workers are very much united on the opposite side of IATSE. The strike vote was one such expression. Another is the steadfast way workers are outlining their own list of demands. The IATSE leadership has certainly “heard” these demands and is ignoring them.

On social media, the union began a campaign of censorship and intimidation, and this is when they initially began to claim that any public criticisms of the TA were divisive and only served the employers. Joel Loeb, son of the IATSE chief and communications director of IATSE, took the opportunity to red bait the WSWS publicly while other supporters of the IATSE bureaucracy privately sent “ice pick” references to the WSWS (a threatening reference to the Stalinist assassination of Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Fourth International).

It is significant that the latest press release comes one week after cinematographer Halyna Hutchins was killed on the set of the film *Rust*. While Hollywood and the media attempt to put the blame for the tragedy on individuals, workers know the tragedy was caused by the miserable conditions that prevail in the industry which have been sanctioned by IATSE and other Hollywood unions.

On the *Deadline* article announcing IATSE’s press release, one worker commented, “Matthew D. Loeb, fumbled the negotiations, IATSE must VOTE NO. The death on the set of *Rust*, can never be allowed to happen again. A lot of people will be blamed, but the thing at the center, responsible for it, is an exhausted crew, overworked, underpaid, and it must never happen. Anyone who ratifies this bad deal is spitting on Halyna Hutchins’ Grave.”

Workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees to fight for the demands that workers need, not what the producers and their union stooges say is affordable. Such a committee, which will establish lines of communications between film and TV crew workers and other entertainment workers, should organize the largest “no” vote possible and an industrywide strike. Workers must oppose the undemocratic “electoral college” system used by the IATSE to ram through contracts and insist on a majority vote on the contract.

The militancy of entertainment workers is part of a

growing wave of strikes in the US and internationally, which is increasingly taking the form of a rebellion against the corporatist unions. IATSE, along with the AFL-CIO and the Biden administration, is trying to head off the development of this strike movement, which includes John Deere and Kellogg’s food processing workers, nurses, steelworkers, coal miners and many others. Workers are fighting to overturn decades of union-backed concessions, which have robbed them of their jobs and livelihoods, while funneling trillions into the hands of the corporate and financial elite.

During the global pandemic, IATSE and the other unions have aided both corporate-backed Democrats and Republicans in their criminal back-to-work and back-to-school policies, even as an average of nearly 1,400 die each day from a disease which, as the *World Socialist Web Site* October 24 webinar demonstrated, can and should be eliminated.

The history of IATSE underscores why this organization cannot be reformed and why workers need new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the rank and file, and committed to a fight to unite all entertainment workers in the US and internationally against the giant corporations that dominate the global industry.

The emergence of left-wing and socialist influence among Hollywood workers and artists in the 1930s and 1940s was a threat to capitalist interests. IATSE, with the support of the Chicago Mafia first and later through scabbing actions against Burbank set decorators, contributed to the blacklisting of thousands of workers in Hollywood and prepared the toxic environment of McCarthyism to play such a destructive role in the arts and entertainment industry and in American cultural life more generally.

Workers are being driven into historic struggles once again, which pose the necessity of a fight not against this or that employer but the whole economic and political setup of capitalism, which sacrifices workers’ lives to corporate profit. The resounding defeat of the sellout contract should be the first step in a revival of the powerful traditions of militancy and socialism among entertainment workers.

?For more information on forming rank-and-file committees, contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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