

“There are two enemies: AMPTP and the IATSE leadership”

Set worker calls on membership to reject IATSE sellout contract

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Over 60,000 International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) film and television workers are voting on a sell-out contract this weekend. The deal does nothing to address the needs of workers, including: the need for more rest between shifts, safe working conditions and better pay and benefits. There is enormous opposition to the deal among IATSE workers, raising the possibility that the contract could be rejected by a wide margin.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is doing everything in its power to help organize a “no” vote. However, we also encourage IATSE workers to begin forming rank-and-file committees *now* to oppose both the intransigence of management and the treachery of the IATSE union, which called off a strike at the last minute to push through this deal, and is doing everything in its power to isolate and confuse the membership.

The IATSE workers need a means to communicate and collaborate without the union breathing down their necks, enabling them to share accurate information and providing them with a forum free of bullying and gaslighting, where the entire membership can discuss the situation and plan their next move.

There is powerful potential for IATSE workers to link up with struggles taking place within the working class around the country and worldwide. On Monday, 35,000 Kaiser workers will begin an open-ended strike, focused on Southern California, the home of most IATSE workers. Tens of thousands of other workers are, or are about to go on strike in other parts of the country, including John Deere workers.

Below we publish excerpts of an interview with a film and television worker and IATSE member from Los Angeles whose name, “Lauren,” is changed to protect her anonymity.

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WSWS: Tell us a bit about conditions on the job.

Lauren: Even on your average set, there are safety issues and problems with extremely long hours. It’s not that one out every 100 sets is dealing with tough working environments—it’s that 90 out of every 100 sets are dealing with it. That is the baseline. That’s important to understand—nearly all sets are difficult working environments. And we cannot, and will not, keep working this way. Maybe it’s a shooting on set, or maybe it’s people exhausted, crashing their cars on the way home from work, or maybe it is heart attack or heat stroke ... the way we are working now is not functional anymore.

It doesn’t matter which department you talk to. Whether it is an entry level worker or the department head, for everyone, this way of working production is not working any more. It has reached such a breaking point that people are broken. We can’t keep going like this. It’s abusive. It didn’t always use to be like this, so it can change again, but for the better.

WSWS: How has COVID affected workers?

Lauren: It’s been horrible for film and TV crews and workers. We

already had such difficult working conditions and brutal hours. Adding COVID on top of what we were already dealing with has really pushed us to another level of anger and intolerance of the status quo.

Initially, of course like everyone, COVID shut down everything. For many crew people, this was the first time in years they hadn’t worked and had a break. Immediately, during the early stages of the pandemic, IATSE and the studio heads and major producers, they all went into a virtual back room, and they negotiated the return-to-work agreement. They wanted to get us back to work as soon as possible.

From a business standpoint, the AMPTP [Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, the trade association negotiating on behalf of the companies with IATSE] and these companies wanted to put out a lot of content. They knew that everyone else in the world was stuck at home, ready to watch everything we could create.

So we went back to work, still very early in the pandemic, promised strict COVID safety protocols and that the employers prioritized our health and safety. We were promised shorter days, these magical 10-hour days you hear about. We were promised, “we [the AMPTP and the studios] have your back, we’re a family,” blah blah blah. That’s not been true. If anything, the hours got longer, they worked people harder.

In the early days of COVID, crews formed pods and bubbles, lived intensely isolated and risky lives, and made more film and TV and streaming content than ever. But then because everyone was isolated and bubbled, the days got longer, not shorter, because we were living and working in the same places. And so we made more content. And the studios made more money than ever. Multiple billions, each of them—all of whom are now saying they can’t afford to do better with residuals and pension investments and wages and the number of shooting days. The studios are crying poverty. It borders on the absurd. And I think this is partially why we are resistant and angry right now.

We never got any hazard pay. We don’t get any significant streaming residuals, not even 1 percent. We were gaslit by the AMPTP into feeling grateful for safe work environments. And, in my personal experience, what actually happens in terms of safety protocols on set or in the production office or in the editing suites is not always following or taking seriously the safety measures that are in the contracts. Many did, but many didn’t.

I resent very deeply the conditions we’re working under, and then to not even have the COVID protocols taken seriously felt like a real slap in the face.

WSWS: How have conditions changed on set?

Lauren: As you know, over the past 10-15 years there’s been a massive consolidation of entertainment corporations. With this, a lot of Wall Street and finance people are coming in to run things. I’ve personally been working on productions for eight years, and I’ve seen conditions

deteriorate in that time. People who have worked 20-plus years say they don't even recognize productions anymore, that's how much it's changed for the worse.

To these people, we are lines on a budget. For example, on a production, to us it would be very clear why we might need an additional rigging team, or an extra AD (assistant director) for safety, but to the highest corporate level who approves our budgets—they don't even know what those words mean, and further, it's of no interest or relevance to them. Those people at the highest level are there to serve their shareholders. Growth above all and productivity before humanity. We are just making a product to them. It's not about keeping people safe, it's about numbers on a budget line.

We the crew, we the working class, we are the heartbeat and magic of industry and this country. And that is what nobody seems to understand. And we are really, really sick of being treated like something other than human.

Many of us work 17-hour days and do not get time off for lunch. Some people literally keep bottles with them to urinate in, they are that connected to their pieces of equipment. Meanwhile, these studio executives and producers, 99.9 percent of them have never worked a day on set in their lives, who if they bother to come to set, they are seated at video village with the director, right up close to the action. There will be a portable AC or heater. There will be Wi-Fi. They will be seated comfortably in a chair with their name on it. An assistant will bring them the good coffee from the special coffee run.

That's not set life. Try coming to set at call, leaving at last man out wrap, not just camera wrap, six days in a row. That's a taste of set life. These studio heads and execs come from money, from elite educations. They exist in a studio culture of ice-cold perfectionism. I've seen assistants get fired by these kinds of people for messing up a single lunch reservation. I have personally lost jobs for making one mistake before. So these are the kind of people who are represented by the AMPTP.

Maybe 30 years ago, it was okay for things to be so unequal. But it's not 30 years ago. And we have been begging and begging.

WSWS: What are conditions like with the union?

Lauren: We are always told to wait. "Well, if you want these things, you have to wait for the three-year cycle." Well, we've been asking for 20 years. Enough is enough.

There are two enemies: AMPTP and the IATSE leadership. The AMPTP is responsible for the studio and producer-level culture I've described, and they are who we will ultimately demand the better contract from. So we will be addressing those issues. But before we can get to the AMPTP, it's important to call out the ways that IATSE leadership has played a big part in this, and it's time that we hold them accountable for that.

IATSE leadership has and is still actively working to try to keep the rank and file away from each other, which is super disturbing. They are blocking all kinds of movement and coordination among the rank and file. Some in leadership are spreading misinformation about the contract and the vote. It's very chilling how they are trying to manipulate us.

But it all sort of connects. Why is communication with leadership so difficult? Why is there this unequal delegate system? Why don't we get to vote more fairly? Why are these ineffective leaders still in positions of power? It's all set up to keep the power in their hands, not in the hands of the membership.

The younger generation that has come of age in our careers has told the leadership, "I can see with my own two eyes that you are gaslighting us, that you are telling me that this is a Hollywood ending, when I can see that it's not." It feels disrespectful beyond belief and we are angry now. We've been patient. No more patience. Now is the time. Our strike authorization vote shocked them. Good. Stay shocked. They need to listen to us.

WSWS: What do you think of the ongoing strike of John Deere workers?

Lauren: We've been following John Deere very closely because they voted their contract down twice now. They are amazing. They inspire us and educate us, because the IATSE leadership has been telling us "No, you can't vote this contract down." And they have done it. The amount of misinformation from some of our leadership has been really shocking, so it's been so nice to have other workers to look to as we navigate down this path. It's helpful to be able to see other workers doing the things we are being misinformed are impossible for us to do. We are in absolute solidarity with them, and all workers in this fight.

WSWS: Do you have any concluding thoughts?

Lauren: The power is all in our hands as members and we can all see what's going on with the AMPTP and our leadership. Before we can deal with the AMPTP, we must commit to our solidarity to each other: that we will stand strong in our solidarity and that we ARE going to do this. That we will stand up to fight for ourselves and each other, and demand a better contract, and if that includes a strike, so be it.

We have realized we have this power and now we need to decide what we want to do with it. The ball is in our court. Both AMPTP and IATSE leadership know that this kind of solidarity is unbreakable, which is why they try so hard to divide us and stop us. But now that we know and can feel the power, we are not stopping. It's our time to come together as members and claim our power. I believe we are standing together, now we need to step forward together.

IATSE President Matt Loeb is out in the press saying [the contract, announced shortly before last month's strike deadline] is a Hollywood ending. Respectfully, no it is not. He didn't ask us how we felt about it, and we don't like it. That's what the contract vote this weekend is about. It's our turn to tell him how we feel. He wants us to be happy with contract gains the size of crumbs, like pieces of gristle that are left over. He wants us to be happy with scraps. Well maybe the IATSE of yesterday was OK with that. But now it's today and we are not happy with scraps anymore. We, the crews who make Hollywood real, will tell you when it's OUR Hollywood ending. He needs to go back to the negotiating table and do better. I'm voting no. It's time we demand better for ourselves. We have earned it and we deserve it.



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