

The way forward for film and television workers in the aftermath of IATSE's sabotage

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Last week's narrow, undemocratic ratification of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees' (IATSE) memorandum of agreement has left film and television workers across the United States embittered and angry.

After workers rallied behind a strike vote of 98 percent, IATSE called off the strike and told the press it had struck a "Hollywood Ending." Workers were then presented with a deal which did not significantly increase turnarounds between shifts, did not guarantee lunch breaks, left dangerous levels of exhaustion on set in place, did not grant rights to streaming revenues and left pay increases well *below* the current rate of inflation.

The union contemptuously told workers this "Hollywood Ending" contract was a great achievement and initiated a campaign of gaslighting and misinformation to ram through the contract. Film and television workers knew better, however, and widely denounced IATSE President Matt Loeb and other IATSE leaders on social media for selling out the workers.

The contract was, in fact, voted down by the membership by 50.4 to 49.6 percent, but the union "ratified" the contract anyway using the anti-democratic delegate system, mirroring the Electoral College in presidential elections. Now, workers are asking what they can do to oppose what has happened and take matters into their own hands.

Matt Loeb, in a statement choking with hypocrisy, declared last week, "The vigorous debate, high turnout and close election indicate[s] we have an unprecedented movement-building opportunity to educate members on our collective bargaining process and drive more participation in our union long-term." Loeb seeks to funnel rank-and-file opposition into the dead-end of the union bureaucracy.

The reality is that Loeb and others did everything they could to ensure the negotiation process was outside of the hands of the rank-and-file membership. Whether it was conducting closed-door negotiations, deleting critical posts on social media pages, preventing workers across locals from organizing opposition meetings, refusing to call a strike or cutting off critics at town hall meetings, the leadership acted in the most dictatorial fashion to impose this contract on the membership.

Workers who have spoken to the *World Socialist Web Site* since the contract was ratified have expressed anger at the results but also concerns that the vote may have been tampered with.

One member of Local 700, the Editors Guild, said, "700 was tampered with due to the electoral process. They only need to tamper with the votes of any of the 3 national guilds (600, 700, and 44)."

He continued, "700 was the ONLY guild to reject the agreement in 2017, and this year they voted to ratify? That's extremely fishy, since [Local] 600 cinematographers voted no this year." He explained that the main opposition in his local was that streaming contributions had not "been fully addressed within this agreement."

Another film worker from Local 728 told the WSWS, "All I can say is that we overwhelmingly voted no on this deal. The leadership was pushing to ratify without the members even having looked at the terms. The popular vote was NO, but the electoral vote [was] yes. ... This was a crap deal."

Similar sentiments could be found throughout social media in the aftermath of the ratification. On Reddit, one worker wrote, "We are all furious over this ridiculous [c]harade the IATSE leadership has made of this contract and our votes."

The left orbit of the Democratic Party has expressed concerns that this worker outrage may grow into a rebellion which the union cannot control.

Jacobin, magazine of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, refusing to acknowledge that the contract was a sellout or betrayal of the workers, said, “Many members saw their opportunity to seize the moment to set higher standards for a grueling industry, and they remained steadfast, even as their leadership ran a ‘vote yes’ campaign.”

This, however, obscures what happened. The IATSE leadership did not simply run a yes “campaign.” They led an operation of lies and threats to ram the contract through against the will of the membership. Matt Loeb, whose total compensation is over \$400,000 a year, did not operate as a leader or representative of film and television workers but as a labor manager for the association representing the producers and studios, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

Jacobin, and other such publications, write not as representatives of the working class, but for sections of the Democratic Party aligned with the union bureaucracy who are worried that a too flagrant disregard for the interests of workers will jeopardize the capacity of IATSE to enforce such contracts in the future. They seek to channel opposition against the collusion of IATSE with the AMPTP into a campaign to reform IATSE, citing positively Cathy Repola, the Local 700 executive director who in 2018 voted against the contract (but voted yes for this contract).

Film and television workers should take a hard look at similar efforts to reform the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). These efforts promoted by *Labor Notes*, *Jacobin* and the Democratic Socialists of America, in those cases where they have led to a change in leadership, produced only a new layer of corrupt union functionaries who have sold out workers just as ably, and as ruthlessly, as their factional opponents within the bureaucracy whom they replaced.

It should be recalled, for example, that the late president of the AFL-CIO Richard Trumka ascended to the leadership of the United Mine Workers in the 1980s and enforced defeats which essentially destroyed the UMWA as a mass organization—but which still controls \$164 million in assets.

In opposition to these efforts, the *World Socialist Web Site* calls on film and television workers to build an independent organization of rank-and-file workers aimed

at democratically representing workers’ interests.

Decades ago, as the end of the postwar boom and the growth of globalization undermined their ability to reconcile a nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective with rising incomes for workers, the unions were transformed from workers organizations into adjuncts of management whose financial and institutional interests are completely integrated with their ability to deliver as many concessions as possible, within the sham framework of “collective bargaining.”

This is why, in spite of the widely acknowledged fact that workers are now in the most powerful position they have been in decades, the unions have sought to smother, prevent or isolate every major struggle of the working class over the last few months, including John Deere, Kaiser, Volvo, IATSE, Dana and others. In most cases, they have enforced, or are seeking to enforce, contracts which not only contain wage increases below the rate of inflation but even below market rates, as employers have been compelled to raise starting wages in an effort to attract workers during a massive nationwide labor shortage.

The anger and frustration of workers cannot be wasted in fruitless efforts to reform these outdated organizations which have become hostile to their interests. Workers must build rank-and-file committees to oppose the betrayals of the unions. Their independence from the corrupt trade union bureaucracy is the first condition through which workers can begin to fight for their own interests.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on film and television workers to contact us and help build such organizations. We will do everything in our power to assist the creation of these organizations and, critically, connect them to the burgeoning rank-and-file rebellion of workers in other industries. Only through a combined struggle of the working class, independent of the outmoded organizations which falsely claim to represent workers, can workers’ demands be met.



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