

Saturday Night Live production workers authorize strike

Joshua Rodriguez
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Post-production crew members for NBC's widely watched show *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) are continuing talks with management for a first contract after voting for union recognition last October and authorizing strike action last month.

On January 12, members of Motion Picture Editors Guild (MPEG), IATSE Local 700, authorized a strike action deadline against their employer, multi-billion dollar National Broadcasting Company Universal (NBCUniversal, NBCU), in the event that NBCUniversal fails to agree to an acceptable contract.

IATSE Local 700 represents around 9,000 post-production professionals around the US who work on both live-action and animated motion pictures.

The contract negotiations between the MPEG Local 700 and NBCUniversal have been ongoing since October 2022, when a team of about 20 editors chose to elect union representation from IATSE, and they have been working without a contract ever since.

The latest contract proposal sent by NBCU on January 13 was rejected by MPEG as "unacceptable," and further talks between the two groups have not been productive.

The freelance editors responsible for creating the show's pre-recorded segments have historically been a non-unionized workforce and have never been on strike.

Hundreds of staff responsible for building sets overnight, to filming and editing promos on the very same day are constantly working under tight deadlines and draconian schedules, often going days without sleep or proper self-care, working 12-plus hours a day. They are a hyper-exploited, union-represented workforce as is common in the US entertainment industry.

The freelance editors who work on SNL editing the

pre-recorded segments of the show (who have never been on strike), typically do two weeks worth of work in the space of one or two days. The schedule is so grueling that according to one source, "One editor would go sleep for a little bit, and then the other editor will come in and continue to work, and when the other editor has slept, they come back and work into the show."

Details have been scarce, but according to the weekly entertainment publication *Variety*, one of the main sticking points in negotiations concern health benefits.

On February 4, MPEG Local 700 posted on their Instagram, "NBCUniversal has indicated they may not even agree to let the crew keep their existing healthcare benefits under a union contract."

Alan Heim, MPEG Local 700 president, released a statement on the matter stating, "Having a voice on the job isn't a laughing matter. 'SNL' deserves its status as a legendary comedy series, and the talented people who help make it deserve all the good things a union will bring."

Other statements of support have come from MPEG national executive director Cathy Repola and MPEG's Second Vice President Louis Bertini; however, workers should not take these statements of support at face value.

Alan Heim, who was reelected in December 2022 when he ran unopposed, and other well-paid bureaucrats at the top, emerged from the same union apparatus that undemocratically enforced a contract that was rejected by the majority of those who voted on it back in November 2021.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time:

"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.”

Workers will remember that this rejected contract was voted down by a margin of 50.4 to 49.6 percent by the rank and file, but the union, using its anti-democratic delegate voting system, forced it through and ratified this rejected contract much in the same way that the Biden administration imposed a pro-management deal on 100,000-plus rail workers in December of last year.

Financial reports vary, but the market capitalization of Comcast-owned NBCUniversal, is in the range of \$160 billion, putting the lie to any claims that the company can’t afford decent health care plans or other benefits for workers.

This past weekend, MPEG Local 700 members and supporters who are not involved in this contract negotiation picketed and leafleted in front of NBC headquarters at Rockefeller Center, New York where audience members waited in line to view the show.

On the latest episode to air on February 4, several cast members were seen wearing shirts that read “Contract Now” in support of their post-production crew members who are working without a contract.

This support comes amidst another struggle taking place at NBC and MSNBC over layoffs. Workers at both are unionized under the NBC News Digital Union, and their members and supporters were scheduled to protest in front of NBC headquarters on Friday, February 10.

The 20 or so SNL editors working without a contract should reach out to their colleagues to organize a common struggle. The two unions, negotiating contracts with the very same company, NBCUniversal, have not even raised this proposal.

This is because the main function of the union tops is

to police their membership by keeping workers divided and isolated from one another. In fact, there are over 360 “local unions” that operate in an industry that provides goods and services to the few mega-corporations that dominate the telecommunications, television and film industry.

Any struggle by the working class cannot be entrusted to the same union bureaucrats who have time and again sold out workers’ demands. This includes the IATSE betrayal of 2021, as well as countless others, from railroad workers, to oil workers, and autoworkers. For workers to carry their struggle forward, they need to establish democratically controlled rank-and-file committees which are independent of the bureaucracy and the two parties of big business.

We encourage all readers in the entertainment industry to contact us for help in creating rank-and-file committees.



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