

SAG-AFTRA and Directors Guild contracts expire June 30: No plans for joint action with striking writers

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Contracts between the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and both the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) expire June 30. With 11,500 television and film writers on strike since May 2, neither union has indicated that it has plans for joint action to resist the attacks of the giant conglomerates and shut down the industry.

The DGA, with 19,000 members working as television and film directors, assistant directors, unit production managers and in other positions, began formal bargaining with the AMPTP June 7. The union has not yet called a strike authorization vote.

Like the writers, DGA members face worsening of working and living conditions, demanding schedules and the increasingly precarious character of their jobs, in addition to inadequate residuals.

The list of the DGA's demands that it has made public, in outline form, includes "securing wage increases that address inflation, maintaining the strength and sustainability of our world-class pension and health care plans" and "negotiating meaningful increases and structural changes to streaming residual formulas that account for the global growth of the audience."

The Guild also promises to protect "the role and vision of Directors" and to fight for improvements in "safety on the set by expanding and encouraging training and addressing long workdays." This comes in the wake of the October 2021 incident on the set of the low-budget film *Rust* that resulted in the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and wounding of director Joel Souza.

For a wage increase to address inflation, it would require beating it. As for "meaningful increases" to streaming residuals, the DGA has claimed that they had accomplished this goal in both of the last two rounds of negotiations. In December 2016, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, "While the guild didn't release details of the new structure, it said the deal more than triples residuals for members working on original content for the biggest streaming companies." But three times a pittance is still a pittance.

Long and dangerous *Rust* workdays, as the episode revealed, are a major issue.

The WSWS recently spoke to an assistant director, Nicola, on the writers' strike picket line, who offered some insight into current conditions.

She told our reporters that traditionally DGA members receive a three percent raise each year, but for the first time in thirty years the Guild is asking for more money, because "we are asking for more to meet a living wage for the hours that we work."

Highlighting the real living conditions of DGA members, Nicola noted: "When people see Hollywood, they think we are all making a lot of money. We are working, that is assistant directors, 70-90 hours a week to make that living wage. These are some of the most expensive cities to live in. I live in New York City. I think we need to be paid fairly and the corporations should not be so greedy."

Assistant directors have exhausting schedules, she went on. They work "non-stop, and once you are home, you are getting phone calls non-stop, and we are just asking for things to make our lives better. We are asking for our health care to be even better, and to secure those things like creative rights for directors which would protect us from the future with AI [artificial intelligence]." This raises equal concern among writers, and with SAG-AFTRA negotiations coming up next, she said, "This is going to be a summer for making big changes."

Nicola said that workers have increasingly come to see the studios' protestations of poverty as a fraud. When COVID hit, she pointed out, "You saw that the studios suddenly had millions upon millions of dollars to put into COVID safety, that they have claimed forever that they do not have for us.

"Even when it comes to pay for production assistants, the lowest-level people, they say they don't have the money. But suddenly everyone saw the façade, on the one hand, and the reality, on the other, when they came up with millions."

While workers are ready to fight, and want to unify their struggles, DGA president Lesli Linka Glatter and the negotiating team have dismissed this possibility by asserting

they fully intend to ink an agreement before the AMPTP begins talks with SAG-AFTRA June 7.

SAG-AFTRA represents more than 160,000 actors, broadcast journalists, dancers, news writers and editors, program hosts, recording artists, singers, voiceover artists and other professionals. The union is currently holding a strike vote. Balloting began May 18, after the SAG-AFTRA board the previous day unanimously urged the membership to authorize a strike, and will continue online until June 5.

Many SAG-AFTRA members have joined the writers' picket lines in solidarity. "It's really like the corporate environment against the working people," a SAG-AFTRA member who wished to remain anonymous told the WSWS at the Netflix picket line.

He spoke critically about the no-strike clause that prevents SAG-AFTRA members from joining the writers. "It seems like it should be under consideration as we negotiate the next rounds of contracts whether we should put in a no-strike clause," he went on. "This is our opportunity to change our tune on that and essentially say, well, next time we're not going to have a no-strike clause because maybe the trust isn't there like it was before."

Like the DGA, SAG-AFTRA has sent out letters telling its members they must cross picket lines and report to work even if writers are picketing their production. The Teamsters bureaucracy issued a hypocritical statement in April that they would not cross writers' picket lines and then instructed their membership to load and unload early in the morning or late in the evening, before or after picketing!

Conditions for SAG-AFTRA members have worsened over the last decade. Most artists have to hold multiple jobs to make ends meet, while non-union work has become routine. The union, incapable of addressing the underlying causes of a changing industry, fines talent for having to accept non-union gigs.

The specific demands of SAG-AFTRA have also not been made public. A letter from Los Angeles Local President Jodi Long insisted that the main issues include "Erosion of income and benefit plan contributions due to inflation and the streaming ecosystem. Reduced residuals. Fast-evolving threats of generative AI. Unregulated and burdensome self-taped auditions."

A joint struggle of entertainment workers would be a starting-point, but the various union leaderships are vehemently hostile to such action, which would raise a host of social, political and cultural questions and seriously rock the boat. Instead they issue empty statements of "support" to each other and call in various Democratic Party politicians to rail meaninglessly against "corporate greed"—the same politicians who are at the beck and call of corporate America and who relentlessly pursue policies of war and austerity.

Broadening the scope of the struggle means turning not to the union bureaucracies, but directly to the West Coast

dockworkers without a contract for almost a year, as well as UPS workers, nurses, teachers, autoworkers at the Big Three who have contracts coming up later this year, and Clarios workers who have overwhelmingly rejected a rotten contract for the second time.

Film and television artists are not simply facing an economic struggle, as important as that is. They confront predatory companies run by multi-millionaire executives whose social and cultural interests are directly opposed to those of the writers, directors, actors and others. In fact, securing workers' decent living and working conditions, including the right to speak the truth about life and society directly and without corporate interference, means challenging the operation of these vast cultural and technical resources as a means of personal wealth accumulation by a handful of corporate sharks.

The pro-big business policies of the various guilds and unions have produced the present crisis. The conditions have not fallen from the sky. They are the result of decades of concessions, retreats and open sellouts. The union leaders who each time proclaimed that a great advance had been made are still in charge.

The same apparatus seeks to wall these struggles off, whether through no-strike clauses, the banning of solidarity strikes or by separating workers based on their positions within the industry or by different contract expiration dates. By separating workers in the WGA, DGA, SAG-AFTRA, Teamsters and IATSE, and keeping bargaining as well as strikes separate, the union tops effectively discourage, isolate and weaken workers.

An opportunity exists to move forward and to strike a serious blow against the global entertainment conglomerates as well as the banks and the hedge funds that own them. To do so, however, entertainment workers will have to take the leadership of the struggle out of the hands of the unions and establish democratically controlled rank-and-file committees which are independent of the unions and the two big business parties. By uniting the struggle of writers, directors, actors and below-the-line workers in the US and internationally, and linking up the struggles with those of workers in other industries, significant change can be achieved.



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