

SAG-AFTRA and studios, networks begin talks behind closed doors

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The determination of Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) members to fight for jobs and better conditions faces serious dangers.

The billion-dollar entertainment and media corporations organized in the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) are continuing their drive to lower wages, cut jobs and increase profits at the expense of entertainment industry workers. This is taking place with the full knowledge and complicity of the various unions involved.

Having forced the members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) out on strike through the provocative rejection of the union’s modest and inadequate demands, and having reached a rotten deal with the Directors Guild of America (DGA), the employers are now focusing their attention on talks with SAG-AFTRA.

The contract between the AMPTP and SAG-AFTRA, whose 160,000 members include film and television actors, journalists, radio personalities, recording artists and other media professionals, expires June 30. Every effort is being made by the establishment at all levels to insure that the tens of thousands of actors and others do not join the writers on strike. Nothing terrifies all the “major players,” management and union officials alike, as much as that prospect.

That such a large-scale walkout would sharply increase the power of the workers and create an enormous crisis for the studios and networks is precisely why the employers *and* the union bureaucrats are so hostile to that possibility and work feverishly to preclude it. Without this general understanding, workers will not be able to orient themselves in the present situation.

Negotiations between the AMPTP and SAG-AFTRA officially began June 7. This followed a balloting by SAG-AFTRA members in which 98 percent voted to authorize a strike.

The contract talks began with the announcement that, as *Variety* put it, “the two sides have already agreed on one thing: they won’t be talking to the media” about their

negotiations. In a joint statement, the AMPTP and SAG-AFTRA explained they would “adhere to a media blackout for the duration of the talks.”

Nothing good will come from secret discussions. The union’s claim that they want to free themselves from the pressures of the media rumor-mill is a falsehood. In fact, they want to “free themselves” from their own members’ concerns and demands. The first thing that SAG-AFTRA members should demand is that representatives elected by the rank and file be present at the negotiations.

There is no reason to place the slightest confidence in any section of the film and television industry union hierarchy. Writers, directors, actors and others are in their present predicament because of years and years of retreats, concessions and betrayals. One “historic” contract has followed another, and workers have fallen farther behind every time.

The immediate run-up to the launch of the SAG-AFTRA talks is illustrative of the overall situation.

On May 31, SAG-AFTRA, IATSE, Teamsters Local 399 and the Department for Professional Employees (an AFL-CIO coalition of 24 unions and 4 million professionals and technicians), along with the WGA, signed what they called a “joint statement of solidarity” with the DGA. It implored the employers “to immediately negotiate a fair agreement that addresses the Directors Guild of America’s unique priorities in good faith.”

As the WSWS wrote: “What can that possibly mean? Instead of making plans to mobilize the entire workforce against the predatory companies, the unions are appealing to the employers to help them out by weakening, dividing and isolating their own memberships. This is a public and scandalous case of sabotage.”

Our analysis was almost immediately confirmed. Only three days later, the DGA announced it had come to a tentative agreement with the conglomerates. The wage increases of 5, 4 and 3.5 percent a year over the proposed contract will result in a further pay cut for directors, assistant directors and the rest of the DGA, given the rate of inflation,

especially in cities like Los Angeles and New York where rents and prices are skyrocketing.

The “unprecedented” reduction in the length of the assistant director’s day by one hour is a fraud. Many of these men and women work 70-90 hours a week, and Hollywood specializes in finding ways around such restrictions. Predictably, the DGA national board has unanimously endorsed the proposed contract, an act of treachery directed against both the striking writers and the SAG-AFTRA membership.

In its public statements, the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy admits that “outdated contract terms, coupled with the evolution of the media business, including shorter season orders and longer hiatuses between seasons makes it increasingly difficult for our members to achieve and maintain a middle class lifestyle working as a performer.” They go on: “In sharp contrast to the diminishing compensation paid to our members, the studios are posting immense profits with a bullish outlook as demonstrated by lavish corporate executive compensation.”

As for residuals, which “are an integral element of any performer’s compensation,” while new business models “mean that more and more SAG-AFTRA content is monetized around the globe, residuals payments are failing to reflect the economic value of this exhibition.”

Technology, SAG-AFTRA officials assert, “has advanced at a rapid pace. Artificial intelligence has already proven to be a real and immediate threat to the work of our members and can mimic members’ voices, likenesses and performances.” But all this has come on the union leadership’s watch. They are fully responsible for this situation. Why should anyone trust that they will resist additional and even far worse attacks?

There is enormous pressure on the SAG-AFTRA leadership to come to terms as miserable as those accepted by the DGA officials.

In response to the DGA tentative settlement, SAG-AFTRA national executive director and chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, in a memo to the union membership, observed carefully that SAG-AFTRA’s bargaining strategy “has never relied upon nor been dependent on the outcome or status of any other union’s negotiations, nor do we subscribe to the philosophy that the terms of deals made with other unions bind us. We continue to stand in strong solidarity with the members of the WGA and with their strike, and we congratulate the DGA on their bargaining and look forward to reviewing the detailed terms of their agreement as soon as possible.”

While Crabtree-Ireland clearly made an effort to separate SAG-AFTRA from the DGA’s stab in the back of the writers, there is no reason to believe he and the other SAG-

AFTRA officials will act any differently.

After all, in another statement, Crabtree-Ireland, according to *Variety*, indicated he was “optimistic that the AMPTP will see that it’s not in the industry’s interest to end up with a two-guild strike at the end of the month. ‘I’m committed to doing everything that we can possibly do to make a deal,’ he said. ‘We need partners on the other side of the table to help us with that. So we’ll see.’” This is hauling up a white flag before the battle has begun.

It is certainly not in the companies’ “interest” to have writers, actors and tens of thousands of others on strike, or in the interest of the ruling elite and the Biden administration, which stand behind the AMPTP.

Like the writers, actors and other performers in film, television and radio face not only continuous economic grinding down and the worsening of conditions in every sphere of their professional lives, but the intellectual and artistic poverty of much of the studios’ and networks’ output. Artistic honesty and depth are incompatible with the capitalists’ drive for profit and their accumulation of unimaginable private wealth.

The economic, political and cultural questions that no one in the entertainment media or the union structures wants to discuss are the critical ones. What must be done so that writers, actors and other professionals can live decently and contribute meaningfully to the cultural level of the population? How can the giant conglomerates be brought under the democratic control of those who actually create films, television series, radio programming and music—as part of the socialist reorganization of economic life?

Like WGA and DGA members, SAG-AFTRA members face the reality that the pro-big business trade union apparatus is an accomplice in the attacks on their jobs and conditions. We urge workers to build rank-and-file committees in all areas and workplaces, controlled democratically by the workers themselves and committed to the needs of the working class, not corporate profit.



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