

New dangers in film and TV writers' strike: SAG-AFTRA officials hint may not call strike when contract expires

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Officials of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), with its tens of thousands of members, have made it known to the media that they may not call a strike July 1 when the union's master contract expires. This would deepen the isolation of the members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), on strike since May 2.

Talks between SAG-AFTRA and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), representing the multi-billion-dollar studios, networks and streaming services, began June 7, following a tentative agreement reached between the AMPTP and the Directors Guild of America (DGA). SAG-AFTRA officials and management have agreed to a blackout of any information about their talks.

However, a June 16 article in *Variety*, obviously based on leaks from SAG-AFTRA representatives ("multiple sources who asked not to be identified"), suggested that negotiators "have a lot of proposals to work through. ... The time crunch has raised the possibility that the union's talks with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers could go past the June 30 deadline."

As *Variety* notes, the SAG-AFTRA board "has the power to call a strike starting on July 1 if no agreement is reached. That would immediately shut down all film and TV production that has not already been halted by the writers strike."

Such a prospect terrifies all the official parties involved, including the AMPTP and the various union bureaucracies, in the SAG-AFTRA, WGA, DGA, Teamsters, IATSE and the rest, as well as Wall Street, the Biden administration and the political establishment as a whole. All those social forces are determined to see an agreement imposed on the SAG-AFTRA membership and a broader strike avoided.

However, as *Variety* observes, this task requires a certain amount of finesse. The "dynamics" could be different in 2023 than in previous contract years "because SAG-AFTRA

members are unusually engaged, thanks to the writers strike and SAG-AFTRA's call for a strike authorization vote. The guild announced that 98% of the voting members backed the authorization, in a show of unity."

In other words, rank-and-file film and television actors and other members of SAG-AFTRA, being hammered along with the rest of the working class by inflation and the attacks of the corporations, are angry and determined to fight.

Moreover, many SAG-AFTRA members "have joined writers on the picket lines. ... If negotiators are able to reach a deal, they will still have to get members to ratify it. Unlike the other guilds, SAG-AFTRA ratification votes frequently involve robust dissent. The board typically recommends ratification by a sizable majority, but not unanimously, and the opponents are sometimes afforded the opportunity to provide a 'minority report' laying out their objections." In short, there is always the danger that the process may still escape the suffocating control of the union hierarchies.

Film and television writers are locked in a sharp, "existential" conflict with the employers. The large corporations are determined to create conditions in which a relative handful of writers have permanent employment and adequate pay, while the rest are reduced to the level of part-time or "gig" workers, paid cheaply, called in when needed and then disposed of.

The policy of the companies is not simply an economic question. As political tensions reach the breaking point, tying a small number of writers to the status quo and intimidating and weakening the others is also a means of class and social self-preservation. Efforts will be made to censor and police film and television, in keeping with the interests of the ruling elite. Opposition to the war in Ukraine, for example, will be attacked on the grounds that it is "unpatriotic" and against the "national interest," and that critics of the conflict are nothing but "Putin's agents."

The WGA officialdom is unable to confront the giant transnational conglomerates and the establishment because it

merely seeks to improve slightly the rate at which writers are exploited. But even that has become more and more impossible given the overall decayed, parasitic state of American capitalism.

Inevitably, the union leadership will give way under the pressure at a certain point and attempt to impose another contract that further degrades the film and television writers' general circumstances. The latter will be told by the Guild that there "was nothing else we could do." If the writers are forced back on the companies' terms, shedding crocodile tears will be a series of officials from unions who have done everything in their power to help isolate the WGA strike, as well as various "populist" scoundrels in the Democratic Party. The writers will be worse off than ever, unless there is a dramatic change of course.

As their comments to the WSWS have indicated, many writers are turning to the left. Indeed, a good number already consider themselves socialists, although much confusion inevitably persists about what socialism is. In the majority of cases, even those writers who consider themselves opponents of capitalism tend to see that as a long-term social goal or vision, separate and distinct from the present conflict with the AMPTP.

In reality, the writers' strike can only make advances to the extent that it becomes openly directed against the profit system, raising all the essential economic, social and cultural questions, and consciously aligning itself with the struggles of workers in other industries—auto, healthcare, education, the docks and more. The strength of the working class, fully mobilized and politically armed, would be absolutely immense. This is precisely why all the official forces, unions, Democrats, media, shake in their boots at the prospect of even a broader strike in the entertainment industry. A new leadership needs to emerge out of rank-and-file committees that would set the writers and other sections of workers on a different course, in opposition to the union bureaucracy and the existing socioeconomic set-up.

One of the snares that threatens to entangle writers and others as they move toward a socialist orientation is represented by the pseudo-left, in the form of *Jacobin* magazine and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in particular. *Jacobin* and the DSA exist to block the development of a genuinely socialist working class movement, continuously attempting to channel discontent back toward the Democratic Party, in the process giving this discredited and widely hated organization a coat of "progressive" and "pro-worker" paint. But today that involves apologizing for the Democrats in Congress, who openly engaged in strikebreaking against the rail workers late last year, and supporting the immensely dangerous, reckless conflict in Ukraine, which threatens humanity with

a third world war.

Jacobin insists on the legitimacy and bona fides of the AFL-CIO trade union leadership, despite the bureaucracy's ferocious defense of American capitalism and its decades of strangling every movement of workers in defense of their jobs and conditions.

In a recent article on the writers' strike ("Hollywood Is Facing the Prospect of Actors Joining Writers on Strike"), *Jacobin* conceals the real threats to the writers' strike. The article makes no mention of the concerted effort by all the entertainment industry unions to ensure that Directors Guild leaders reached a tentative agreement with the employers in early June, thus hypothetically leaving enough time for SAG-AFTRA to reach its own deal, soften up its membership and push through a ratification—all before July 1.

Jacobin simply writes politely: "Not all of Hollywood is lining up to strike simultaneously: the Directors Guild of America (DGA) is negotiating its own new contract with the AMPTP, and the two sides have just reached a tentative agreement, quashing hopes among WGA members that the directors would break from their past and unite in solidarity with them."

But no matter, since the "show of unity between SAG-AFTRA and the WGA ratchets up the actors' leverage at the bargaining table." Indeed, a "show" of unity, which *Jacobin* chooses to fall for.

Not a single word of warning about the conspiracy of the union leaderships, acting in the interests of the corporations, to abandon the writers and impose further concessions on every section of entertainment industry workers. And this uncritical, "sedative" approach is repeated by all the pseudo-socialist publications in the US and UK. Each cites the empty comments of this or that union official and his or her meaningless denunciations of corporate greed, all of it treated as good coin. Nor is there a single word about the need to oppose the present cultural situation, in which the demands of artistic freedom of expression inevitably come up against the political-ideological requirements of the ruling elite.

We urge writers, SAG-AFTRA members and others to contact us and begin constructing rank-and-file committees in opposition to the corporations and the union bureaucracies.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact