

Actors warn SAG-AFTRA union leadership: Don't sell us out!

David Walsh
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An open letter signed by more than 300 actors (the number has now grown to more than 1,000) to the leadership of their union, the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), is a highly principled statement that explicitly denounces plans to betray the membership.

The contract of some 160,000 SAG-AFTRA members with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), representing more than 350 US television and film production companies, including all the giant studios, networks and streaming services, expires at midnight June 30.

The actors' letter warns the union not to surrender and expresses a determination to fight the corporations without compromise. A strike, they write, brings hardships to many, "but we are prepared to strike if it comes to that." In unusually stern language, the signatories insist this "is not a moment to meet in the middle."

The thoughtful, perceptive letter carries the names of numerous prominent figures, including Kevin Bacon, Meryl Streep, Liam Neeson, Quinta Brunson, Ben Stiller, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, David Duchovny, Glenn Close, Brendan Fraser, Jennifer Lawrence, John Leguizamo, Téa Leoni, Laura Linney, Bob Odenkirk, Mark Ruffalo, Marissa Tomei and many others.

To their credit, some of the most successful performers in film and television have added their signatures to this document, expressing a general sense of class solidarity. They obviously recognize there is a difference between their aims and the plans of the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy. And they are speaking out, having drawn encouragement from the rank and file—who voted 98 percent for a strike—and from the writers who have been on strike for nearly two months.

This is a thoroughly welcome development. Series critical of the profit system like *Succession*, *The Dropout* and *Dopesick* are not aberrations. Conditions have matured. The stagnant, reactionary political and cultural climate that has prevailed for decades is breaking up, with major implications for every aspect of social life.

Since the 11,500 members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) went on strike May 2, strenuous efforts have been made by the conglomerates, the various union officialdoms (including the WGA's itself) and, no doubt behind the scenes,

the Biden administration, to ensure that the writers' strike would not spread. This has had the character of a conspiracy against the entertainment industry workers.

First, intense pressure was placed on the Directors Guild of America (DGA) leadership, which did not need much coaxing, to reach a rotten deal with the employers. The resulting agreement did not protect directors, assistant directors, unit production managers and others from the ravages of inflation or anything else. The deal was ratified, but reflecting widespread mistrust and disappointment, only 41 percent of the membership voted on the deal and only 35 percent of the DGA overall favored it.

Next, the SAG-AFTRA leadership began making noises in public about extending negotiations past June 30 and praising the ongoing, secret talks with management as "extremely productive," asserting that they remained "optimistic" an agreement could be reached before the deadline. SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher arrogantly commented, "We're not providing you with a lot of detailed reports tonight because, well, frankly, it's very confidential what's going on in there."

These developments quite rightly set off alarm bells and the determination to disrupt the imminent sell-out. As *Rolling Stone* reports, the union's message "didn't sit right with a lot of actors who are urging SAG not to settle for a deal that doesn't represent all of their demands." Thus, the letter in question is addressed to the SAG-AFTRA leadership and Negotiating Committee.

The open letter puts the union leaders on notice. It refers to Artificial Intelligence "as a threat to our livelihoods that must be addressed right now," and adds, suggestively, "We felt as though you understood how wildly our pay and our residuals have been undermined, how long we're being held between seasons." In other words, you are now demonstrating that you *do not understand*...

The letter of the 300 actors points out that "solidarity demands honesty, and we need to make clear our resolve." After indicating the willingness to embark on a strike, the letter, in its strongest passage, points out that "*we are concerned by the idea that SAG-AFTRA members may be ready to make sacrifices that leadership is not.*" (Emphasis added.) This is a direct warning about a betrayal in the offing.

The letter of protest explains that the entertainment industry has reached “an unprecedented inflection point” and “what might be considered a good deal in any other year is simply not enough.” “With inflation and continued growth in streaming, we need a seismic realignment,” nothing less than a “transformative deal.” It explicitly addresses itself to the problems of “working class actors.”

The letter to the SAG-AFTRA leadership makes mention, if only briefly, of cultural-artistic questions that go beyond the economic issues, as important as those are. It argues that, along with “our wages” and “our craft,” “our creative freedom” has “been undermined in the last decade.” This refers to changes in film and television production and the unchallenged domination of transnational conglomerates over every corner of the entertainment industry. Breaking this stranglehold requires a new political orientation, aimed at the socialist reorganization of society.

The sharply worded letter concludes by asserting that “it’s not an exaggeration to say that the eyes of history are on all of us. We ask that you push for all the change we need and protections we deserve and make history doing it. If you are not able to get all the way there, we ask that you use the power given to you by us, the membership, and join the WGA [writers] on the picket lines.”

The SAG-AFTRA letter, directed toward the rank-and-file membership as much as it is toward union officials, will come as a surprise to—and incense—all the parties in the various union headquarters, studio and network boardrooms and the White House. The unions’ efforts to divide, split, isolate and betray have run into a wall of opposition. Instead of selfishness and individualism, solidarity prevails.

The actors’ letter points toward processes occurring broadly among film and television workers and beyond. A radicalization is well underway. This is a timely and much needed development, not simply for the writers who have taken a courageous stand and the SAG-AFTRA membership itself, but for cultural life as a whole. Great numbers of people are outraged by existing conditions, and here we have the spirit of revolt returning to cultural life! Paraphrasing Trotsky, a protest against existing reality always forms part of a really creative piece of artwork or social act. Every important step forward in culture begins with rebellion. This applies to the general social situation—struggles are erupting all over.

Television and film actors, along with the rest of the working population, have been hammered by inflation, deteriorating conditions, relentless corporate attacks on every front. The giant firms have suffered serious setbacks in their streaming efforts (according to the *Financial Times*, “the stock market wiped more than half a trillion dollars in value from the largest entertainment groups” last year) and intend to make workers pay for that.

Every actor, writer, director and crew member knows that studio and network executives are pulling in unimaginable

sums of money—in some cases, \$50 million, \$100 million a year or more—while proclaiming that workers’ attempts to stay afloat are “unreasonable” and would be “detrimental” to the industry.

More generally, the American ruling elite is attempting to impose the entire cost of its endless Wall Street bailouts and its equally endless murderous wars on the backs of the working class. Politically, the population is given the official choice between the pro-corporate, nuclear warmongering of Biden and the Nazi-like braying and threats of Trump.

There is a growing feeling of revulsion against the entire social and economic set-up. Political and cultural life strain toward a breaking point. If they could get away with it, the film and television companies would produce nothing but rubbish, a handful of “blockbusters” a year, and put everyone’s brain to sleep. However, people’s eyes are not closed to this process. “Art” and “profit,” as it is understood by many, including many writers on the picket line, are mortal enemies. “Capitalism” is more and more of a swear word.

The WWS and the Socialist Equality Party have been fighting for a change of course in the writers’ strike and warning about the dangers facing SAG-AFTRA members. Three weeks ago, we wrote:

A new direction in the writers’ strike is called for, along with new organizations, representing the rank-and-file *and* the political-cultural needs of broad layers of the population. Unity is necessary, and every worker instinctively gravitates in that direction. However, unity in the ranks when those at the head are leading those behind them into a trap, which they are organically incapable of avoiding, is not healthy. At that point, voices of dissidence and opposition have to be raised.

Those “voices” are beginning to be raised, even if by members of a different union.

The letter of the actors is an important social and political development. It reflects the impact of the rapidly developing militancy of the American and international working class upon the orientation of artistic circles under conditions of capitalist economic crisis, political reaction, endless war, and social breakdown.



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