

Los Angeles writers and actors express agreement with open letter to SAG-AFTRA leadership warning against sell-out

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The open letter originally signed by some 300 actors addressed to the leadership of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), warning them not to betray their tens of thousands of members, has received wide support. The number of actor-signatories has climbed to more than 1,000.

On picket lines, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), about to enter their third month on strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which represents the multibillion-dollar entertainment companies, also expressed their backing for the actors' letter.

The public letter is an important protest against the ongoing attacks on workers in the entertainment industry, as well as a sign of the readiness to fight the corporations. It exposes the chasm between the rank-and-file and the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy, which is conducting talks behind closed doors and attempting to quash the militancy of the membership, who voted 98 percent in favor of a strike.

Following the announcement of the Directors Guild of America (DGA) contract ratification, in a carefully scripted public video announcement on June 23, SAG-AFTRA National President Fran Drescher and National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland made clear their intention to push through a deal, given the "very narrow window of time remaining before our contract expires."

What's their rush? After the expiration of the contract June 30, SAG-AFTRA members will finally be able to strike alongside the writers in a common struggle against the conglomerates that control entertainment and media, bringing the entire industry to

a halt.

The union bureaucracy's reliance on secrecy and "confidentiality" has no doubt played a role in discrediting and bringing them into disrepute with thousands of their members. The open letter only made public what many SAG-AFTRA members were no doubt thinking, that a dirty deal was in the making. Through the letter, actors sent a strong message, standing up and saying "No! We want to fight and will do so alongside the writers, our class brothers and sisters."

On the picket line outside Warner Bros. in Burbank, California, the WWSW spoke to Jamie, a Writers Guild member, about the letter sent to the SAG-AFTRA leadership. He told us that having the actors come out on strike with the writers "would be great."

Jamie added, "If they make the choice to be out here with us, or they make the choice not to accept a deal, and they do listen to the Meryl Streeps of the world, that's great for us. That works. We'll shut this whole damned town down! I personally feel like we should be asking for more."

He also pointed to the similarity in the lack of transparency of both the WGA and SAG-AFTRA officialdoms: "The leadership, they're not that communicative with us when they're negotiating. They just aren't."

Jamie said he was optimistic because of the determination of writers to get a better life. He noted that he had participated in the 2007-08 strike, and there would be perhaps ten people present at the pickets, but this year, "This strike, at any given moment, a minimum of 50, 60, 70 people. That's the one thing that's kind of giving me hope."

Malcolm, an actor, is in SAG-AFTRA and was picketing with writers. He declared that, “It has always been a dream of mine to be up there with the Meryl Streeps and the Mark Ruffalos of the world on the big screen. But I’ve only gotten the chance to do minor stuff.”

He elaborated, “What it all boils down to at the end of the day is nobody really sees the little people like me. We’re on screen, and the movie wouldn’t make any sense without us. Even if we have no lines or one line, we are very necessary.”

In solidarity with his co-workers, he continued: “I’ve also witnessed my brothers in arms, members of IATSE, members of WGA, DGA, the Teamsters, and see how much work they do just for us to get a few seconds on film. All these guys are out in the heat, sweating, doing all this hard work. So, I’m prepared to strike with them, I’m prepared to picket with them, and I’m definitely prepared to strike with the rest of SAG-AFTRA because the truth is there are more actors like me than there are Streeps or Ruffalos.”

Malcolm described actors’ conditions and some of their demands: “We aren’t getting paid what’s fair. We don’t get residuals for the films we work on unless we actually get a decent role. There are so many things that we should be fighting for. We should be fighting for more work for us, more representation on set.”

He went on, “When it all comes down to it, whatever Fran Drescher and those people in that room, whose negotiations we are not allowed to hear, whatever they decide for us, we still ultimately get the right to say yes or no to that.”

On the DGA deal and secrecy, Malcolm made clear that the “DGA kind of sold us down the river,” and “I have a problem with that. I want as much information about what’s going on, because it affects me, right?”

Malcolm also shared some thoughts on the AMPTP and his fellow actors: “The companies can afford to keep actors on their payrolls, and not hire, fire, hire, fire, and put us all in this gig economy where most of my friends are, who either drive for Uber or for the food delivery companies, Uber Eats, Grubhub. These are all the different things we’re having to do just to survive—and be able to pursue the work that we really want to do.”

About Artificial Intelligence (AI), he expressed his concerns: “I think the number one thing we should be

fighting for is jobs and making sure that AI doesn’t take them away. Like I said, most of my acting work has been in the background. AI can just paint me on screen digitally. Disney owns my image already. They’ve scanned my body so they could just put me into their movies now.”

Malcolm outlined what he thinks needs to be done, “We don’t need to have the people on top controlling everything and not giving people a chance to work and make a fair wage. Whatever it takes, across all industries, I’m here, I’m letting my voice be heard, I’ll go out in the streets and protest, whatever. I’m here for other people too. It’s not just for myself. I mean, sure, I want to work, but at the end of the day this is about freedom of choice, freedom to be who you are.”

We also spoke with Ben, a SAG-AFTRA member as well, as he was walking the writers’ picket line (which he also did in 2007-08). He applauded his fellow actors’ open letter: “I agree with the its sentiment. I was concerned by that message from our president. I’ve been alarmed by many of the messages of our president, because they don’t seem to take into consideration all of us. And I’m not here for myself. I’m here because I’m a member of a union, and I believe that our strength is derived by our unity and so I’m here today to demonstrate that.”

Ben summed up the existential nature of the struggle by explaining, “Either we’re going to be able—as artists—to continue to make a living, a dignified one, or we’re not. In that case, the arts will be populated solely by people who are independently financed. That’s going to be a sad day if we lose the richness and the tapestry that you get from a robust middle class, working class, the working artist. So that’s among the reasons I’m here today.”



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