

Last-minute contract extension: SAG-AFTRA officials do everything in their power to avoid calling strike

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Four and a half hours prior to the expiration Friday night of the union's contract with the entertainment corporations, Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) officials announced to their 160,000 members that talks with the employers were being extended until 11:59 p.m. July 12.

SAG-AFTRA and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) issued a joint statement noting the extension and adding that the "parties will continue to negotiate under a mutually agreed upon media blackout. Neither organization will comment to the media about the negotiations during the extension."

In their open letter to the membership, SAG-AFTRA officials, including president Fran Drescher, national executive director and chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland and the members of the TV/Theatrical negotiating committee (including such figures as Sean Astin, Shari Belafonte, Frances Fisher and Joely Fisher), asserted that they had "been in negotiations with the AMPTP for more than three weeks under an unusually tight negotiating schedule while fighting for a comprehensive and inclusive contract."

In order, they wrote, "to exhaust every opportunity to achieve the righteous contract we all demand and deserve, after thorough deliberation it was unanimously decided to allow additional time to negotiate" by extending the contract until July 12. "No one should mistake this extension for weakness. We see you. We hear you. We are you."

The decision, in fact, was "weak," cowardly and high-handed. Friday's eleventh-hour email simply presented the illegitimate extension of negotiations to the union's 160,000 members as a fait accompli. SAG-AFTRA officials decided "unanimously" among themselves to continue the secret talks, about whose contents and progress the membership knows nothing. There isn't a shred of democratic procedure or concern here. Why should anything good for actors and the other members of SAG-AFTRA come out of this behind-

closed-doors process? The last-minute delay chiefly makes clear that union leaders are focused on one goal, avoiding a strike that—along with the two-month-old writers' strike—would shut down film and television production.

In this, the union is serving as an arm of the big companies and the ruling elite as a whole, who are terrified by a broader strike that would disrupt the cultural and media apparatus and, objectively, call into question the system of film and television for corporate profit.

Provocatively, the union's decision to put off a strike came only days after the circulation of a letter among SAG-AFTRA members specifically warning about a betrayal. The members' "open letter," which as of Friday apparently had more than 2,000 signatories, noted that strikes bring hardship, "but we are prepared to strike if it comes to that." The strongly worded letter explained that the entertainment industry had 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," it went on, nothing less than a "transformative deal." It explicitly addressed itself to the problems of "working class actors." The signatories insisted this "is not a moment to meet in the middle." It referred to how much actors' pay and residuals "have been undermined" and "how long we're being held between seasons."

The letter of protest argued that "solidarity demands honesty, and we need to make clear our resolve." In its sharpest passage, the letter pointed out "*we are concerned by the idea that SAG-AFTRA members may be ready to make sacrifices that leadership is not.*" (Emphasis added.) This was a direct warning about the danger of a sell-out. The *Hollywood Reporter* referred to the letter as a "bombshell."

What immediately prompted the appeal apparently was the video message by Drescher and Crabtree-Ireland sent out to the union membership boasting about how well the

“extremely productive” talks with management were going. Drescher added that “We’re standing strong and we’re going to achieve a seminal deal.” In the face of the relentless corporate attacks and the arrogant, ruthless treatment meted out to the striking workers in particular, the SAG-AFTRA leaders’ virtual running up a white flag aroused widespread ire. One actor, who signed the letter, told the *Hollywood Reporter* in regard to the Drescher-Crabtree-Ireland video, “I don’t need the performance. I need the action. And most certainly, when that video went out, I was doubly concerned. So when the opportunity to sign came to me I said ‘absolutely.’”

A second signatory told the *Hollywood Reporter* that “I’m grateful the A-listers got the ball rolling, but it’s the working actors who are trying to make a living whose voices really need to be heard.”

Chuck Slavin (*Daddy’s Home 2*), a member of the union’s New England Local board, told the publication in an email that the “importance of this letter is to reaffirm the commitment of the signatories that it is no longer business as usual between our members and our leadership. … The last several contracts, especially with the allowance of streaming, has crippled the earnings from background artist to Hollywood star.”

The announcement June 30 by the union officials to extend talks amounted to a slap in the face of the thousands who signed the open letter and to the tens of thousands who are suffering as the result of the drive by the conglomerates to reduce costs at the expense of writers, directors, actors and every section of film and television workers.

SAG-AFTRA itself acknowledges in its public pronouncements 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.” In sharp contrast, the union writes, “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.”

The union press release adds that 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.” Further, “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.”

A particular grievance of the actors is the reliance of the production companies on actors to create their own audition tapes, an expensive and time-consuming proposition. SAG-AFTRA points out that such auditions “are unregulated and

out of control: too many pages, too little time and unreasonable requirements have made self-taping auditions a massive, daily, uncompensated burden on the lives of performers.” It has been estimated that by out-sourcing the task, which used to be carried out by the studios and networks having actors reading with other actors, the companies are saving \$250 million a year.

An article that appeared in *Variety* in May provided some picture of the reality of actors’ lives and careers. It noted that amid industry changes, “actor wages appear to be falling. Between 2021 and 2022, SAG-AFTRA added 6,000 new members but its dues payments decreased \$6 million.” Since 2020, “membership has increased by 10,000 while dues have remained flat.”

In any given year, *Variety* observes, an estimated 50 percent of the union’s “approximately 171,000 members won’t earn a single penny for acting; only 5-15% of members earn enough to qualify for the health care threshold of \$26,470. In 2020, SAG cut the health care benefits for nearly 12,000 actors. … Those who safely earn a middle-class wage might account for a measly 2% of the union’s membership. The workforce is becoming ever more precarious, gig-like and uncertain.”

These conditions explain the anger boiling up in the ranks of the union, which found expression in the open letter signed by some of the most prominent figures in the field.

This challenge to the bureaucracy has only been met with new attempts to block a strike. When SAG-AFTRA officials exclaim that they can “see” and “hear” their membership, they are saying, in effect, “We see and hear you, and it frightens us to death, driving us even more deeply into the embrace of corporate management.” The urgency of building rank-and-file committees, taking the conduct of the negotiations and a potential strike, out of the hands of the pro-capitalist union officials, becomes more pressing with every turn of events.



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