

“I think they should man up and strike,” SAG-AFTRA actors call for joint struggle with striking writers

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Film and television workers in the Writers Guild of America (WGA) have been on strike for over two months against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which represents the largest studios and networks in the world. AMPTP members include the networks ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC, streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon, and major studios including Paramount Pictures, Sony, Universal and Walt Disney.

While the 11,000 members of the WGA have been on strike since May 2, AMPTP negotiators have refused to meet with their WGA counterparts. In a repeat of the 2007-2008 strike, which laid the groundwork for many of the major issues—such as paltry residuals—that writers are currently striking over, the AMPTP is seeking to keep writers isolated on the picket lines while making deals with the other major film and television unions.

In this conspiracy, the AMPTP can count on the top union bureaucrats to betray the will of the membership. On June 23 the Directors Guild of America (DGA) announced that a tentative agreement, for which only 35 percent of the membership voted in favor, had been ratified. Prior to the announcement of the tentative agreement, a joint communication was issued by all the entertainment union officials proclaiming their alleged “solidarity” with each other’s struggle.

Last month, the 160,000 actors, composers, musicians and other artists who comprise the membership of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), voted by 98 percent in favor of authorizing a strike once their contract expired June 30. Shortly after the strike authorization totals were announced, SAG-AFTRA leaked to the press that they were prepared to continue negotiations beyond the contract expiration.

An open letter was initiated by hundreds of actors in late June, addressed to the SAG-AFTRA leadership and warning them not to betray their struggle and keep the striking writers isolated. The letter has now been signed by more than 2,000 actors.

In the letter, whose signatories include prominent figures such as Meryl Streep, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Mark Ruffalo, Kevin Bacon, Amy Schumer, Ben Stiller and Bob Odenkirk, the performers

wrote that they were ready to strike but that the leadership apparently was not, “We are concerned by the idea that SAG-AFTRA members may be ready to make sacrifices that leadership is not,” they said.

Last Friday, arrogantly rejecting this appeal by large numbers of their members, only hours before the contract expiration, SAG-AFTRA officials reached an agreement with the AMPTP to extend the negotiations until just before midnight July 12.

On the picket line in Los Angeles Wednesday, asked to comment on the open letter, and the extension of talks, Ken, an actor and member of SAG-AFTRA, told the WWS, “Honestly, I think they’re caving a little bit. I think they should man up and strike. I don’t think that an extension is really necessary. I think they’re being weak about it. No offense to [SAG-AFTRA president] Fran Drescher, but I really do feel that it’s time to do what everybody else is here doing.

“I don’t know why the leadership did that,” he added, “But I think we should join the Writers Guild. Their strike started on May 2. I’ve been out here picketing once or twice a week since then. Luckily, I have the time to be able to do it, and I’m in support of it.”

Ken agreed that in light of the unilateral extension, rank-and-file actors should be privy to the negotiations between the AMPTP and SAG-AFTRA. “You’ve got to know what’s going on. And they’ve got to be honest about it with the people that they’re representing, meaning us, meaning all these people here that are walking.”

Commenting on a recent analysis by research firm Equilar Inc. which showed that top Hollywood executive pay in 2021 had risen by 50 percent since 2018, to \$1.43 billion, Ken said, “The richer are getting richer, the poorer are getting poorer, and the guy in the middle is just barely making it. And it’s like a play on the film *The Shining*. ‘All work and no play makes Jack a poor boy.’

“So right now it kind of sucks and that is why I’m a little upset at the SAG-AFTRA negotiations extension. They’re just caving, and I think they should just stand up.”

Asked if he thought the interests of the union bureaucracy were separated from those of the membership, Ken said, “Totally. A thousand percent. And there’s even some people that are on the SAG board that come out to these events, and I don’t think they are doing enough.

“I’ve seen one gentleman, for example, who’s a big representative for both the east and west unions. He comes out, he grabs a megaphone, talks for three minutes, gets a couple photo ops with a bunch of people wearing SAG shirts, and then leaves ... Now maybe he goes to another picket and does the same thing, but if you’re going to show up on a picket line and you’re going to talk the talk, grab a sign and walk around for an hour, man. Because there’s people like us that have been walking around for four or five hours at a time.”

Ken, who has appeared in many major films and television shows, explained how studios are using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and computer technologies to steal actors’ images to be used later on without compensation. “Scanning is a process where they photograph your whole body,” he explained. “They scan you from head to toe, and what they do is they insert that in their scene. So, if a scene calls for 12 people, two of which are principal actors, they scan 10 people, they just put them in, game over. So now, does the actor get paid for it? No, she didn’t get paid. She got paid for that one day, but she didn’t get paid for any of the days that they used her.

“I wouldn’t mind you pulling me back up out of the grave to use me in certain things. But if I’m alive, I want to get paid for every time I’m doing something and every time I’m scheduled to work. I want to work those days and I don’t want to have to worry, hey, are they going to use me or are they going to abuse me? There’s a difference.”

WSWS reporters had the opportunity to speak with Sid, a film and television writer, who also participated in the 2007-2008 strike. “It’s different this time. I think because labor throughout the United States and the world is different. What we’re seeing is that all the corporations care about is the bottom line. They don’t care about the human capital, the human investment. They just care about stockholders and can we make more money by squeezing as much as we can out of the workers and give them less and less so that our bottom lines look better?

“So it’s come to our industry right now. And I think the most important thing for us is that we don’t want writing to become a gig economy. We want writing to be viable for us and for the next generation. The myth around the country is that we’re all rich and we’re all living in mansions. We’re middle class writers. We just want to make a living, we want a fair wage, and we want to be able to support our families, and then pass it on to the next generation of writers.”

Like Ken, Sid had concerns about the implementation of AI technology not under the control of writers themselves. “With this technology, it much easier for the corporations not to hire us,

because they’re like, oh, we’ll give you a one-step deal to rewrite this AI script.

“And so we’re talking about things that if we don’t take care of them now, we’re gonna be in trouble three years from now, six years from now, nine years from now. Because what the corporations want this to be is to be like: ‘we hire you for one specific thing, then we fire you after six weeks or nine weeks.’ We’re trying to prevent that.

“I think this fight we are having, we should have had three years ago, but we had the pandemic that pushed everything down the line. We want transparency. We want to know who’s watching, how many people are watching, and based on that, we want to be paid for that. They won’t open their books at all.”

Referring to the open letter issued by SAG-AFTRA actors, Sid said, “I thought that was interesting, because when we did the strike in 2007 and 2008, it felt like there was a big split between all the unions. Now it feels like they understand this is an existential threat. We can no longer take the crumbs and go, ‘Wow, we kind of got a good deal, we all compromised.’

“To see those big-name actors say, ‘We’re not just going to take any old deal,’ told me that they understand what the threat is. So it heartened me. Then Fran Drescher added her name to it. After she had come out earlier in the week and said, things are looking rosy, which I thought was a curious thing to say when you’re supposed to have a news blackout. So she signed on after 1,000 actors, many of them big names, signed it and let her know, we’re serious, don’t come back with a half-baked deal because we’re not going to take it.

“The pandemic made people stop and say, take stock of their lives. What’s the quality of our lives now? How can we make it better? There was a general uprising in terms of protesting, you had George Floyd and you had all these other things. They’re all part of the continuum of people saying ‘Hey, we have power to come together.’”



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