

The SAG-AFTRA strike and the path of global class struggle

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If a strike by the 160,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) proceeds Wednesday night, it will be one of the largest strikes in the US in decades, and further deepen the resurgent global class struggle. Workers must reject the desperate, last-minute efforts of the corporations to bring in federal mediators and strangle strike action, and any attempt by the union to announce another delay or sellout.

The tens of thousands of actors, broadcast journalists, news writers, editors and others would join the 11,000 members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) on strike since May 2. The SAG-AFTRA strike would shut down virtually all remaining film and television production in the US and international film and television production that involves US actors.

The potential shutdown of major portions of the entertainment industry in the US, in the first “double strike” by writers and actors since 1960, has enormous implications.

First, it demonstrates the great strength and scope of the working class, in the center of world capitalism. At a stroke, workers can halt operations in a multi-billion-dollar industry indispensable to bourgeois rule and stability.

Second, the reach of the strike and its impact on global film and television production bring out the interconnected, international character of cultural life and the common needs and interests of artists and workers in film, television and all related fields.

Third, a strike will encourage other workers to resist the corporations and the relentless attacks on jobs, wages and conditions, including of UPS, auto and hotel workers. Moreover, the SAG-AFTRA membership is aligning itself, objectively, with workers in struggle all around the world.

Fourth, the growing opposition of all sections of the

working class exposes the continuous propaganda effort of the media and the politicians to paint America as a generally contented, prosperous country, supportive of its government’s endless wars. In fact, the United States is a seething cauldron of social anger and opposition.

SAG-AFTRA workers would be striking over numerous concrete issues, including declining incomes due to inflation and the growth of streaming, which has both dealt a devastating blow to residuals and resulted in shorter seasons and less work. The growth of artificial intelligence will allow the conglomerates to recreate performances and replace human actors.

A *Variety* article in May reported that since 2020, SAG-AFTRA membership had increased by 10,000 while dues income had “remained flat,” revealing a fall in real wages. In any given year, an estimated 50 percent of SAG-AFTRA’s members “won’t earn a penny for acting; only 5-15% of members earn enough to qualify for the health care threshold of \$26,470.” *Variety* estimated that only 2 percent of the union’s membership “safely earn a middle class wage... The workforce is becoming ever more precarious, gig-like and uncertain.”

At the same time, writers and actors confront gigantic corporations, organized in the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), such as Disney, Amazon, Netflix, Apple, Sony and Warner Bros., with trillions in assets.

The executives of these firms continue to gorge themselves even as they denounce the “unreasonable” demands of the writers and actors. The *Los Angeles Times* revealed in early June that pay “for Hollywood’s top executives soared during the height of the pandemic, climbing to \$1.43 billion in 2021, up 50% from total pay in 2018.” Over the past five years, the *three* highest-paid entertainment industry executives made a combined \$1.1 billion. “Even in a country racked by economic inequality,” the *Times* wrote, “Hollywood’s pay scales

are unique.”

Moreover, the recent letter of SAG-AFTRA members, ultimately signed by more than 2,000 performers, addressed to their union leaders and warning them not to carry out a betrayal, was a sign of new, volatile times. In response to rosy pronouncements from union leaders, the open letter demanded “a seismic realignment” and nothing less than a “transformative deal.” It expressed concern “that SAG-AFTRA members may be ready to make sacrifices that leadership is not.”

This highly welcome action undermined efforts to reach a sellout and weakened the SAG-AFTRA leaders. The revelation that union president Fran Drescher spent a lucrative weekend in Italy “mugging for cameras” with Kim Kardashian during the run-up to a possible strike further outraged actors. Kardashian had aroused ire for crossing a writers’ picket line in late June. Drescher also revealed herself once again to be under the sway of reactionary anti-vaccination propaganda.

The present eruption in film and television production is about far more than streaming and residuals. Not only does the present situation expose film and television production as a bad “business model,” as certain industry critics suggest, it reveals a growing awareness that American capitalism is a “bad,” in fact, an untenable “social model.”

In the final analysis, at issue in the combined writers’ and actors’ strike action is the degenerate and dangerous state of US and global capitalism. Popular hostility is mounting to America’s never-ending wars and the threat of nuclear annihilation, to poverty and social inequality, to ecological catastrophes, to the needless death of millions in the pandemic, to homicidal police violence, to the attacks of the courts on abortion and other basic rights, to the censorship and banning of books, to the pro-corporate, warmongering Biden administration and ignorant, fascist thugs like Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis.

Shutting down film and television production is a threat and a challenge to the corporate throttling of artistic freedom and creativity. Industry CEOs without an original thought in their heads preside for the most part over the production of a series of comic book fantasies and “action blockbusters,” one emptier and more miserable than the last. Writers and actors who crave doing serious, enduring work—significant examples of which have begun to emerge in recent years—can only look on in horror at the predominance of rubbish, and the deliberate effort by the studios and networks to turn audience members’ brains to

mush. The strike movement of the writers and actors must encourage a turn to realism in film and television production, as artists are brought up against the harsh facts of contemporary social life.

The leadership of the entertainment unions as a whole has already proven its worthlessness from the point of view of struggle. Writers and actors need 25 percent wage increases and more simply to make up for what they’ve lost, thorough-going control over the use of artificial intelligence in the industry, and residuals tied to the success and viewership of programs and films, which require the companies to open their books to workers’ inspection. The seriousness of the situation and the dimensions of the struggle demand new organizations, rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by the membership and expressing their increasing determination to pursue the fight to the end.

The SAG-AFTRA strike, if it breaks out, will occur in a tumultuous social and political context.

On the one hand, the imperialists in Vilnius, led by Biden, are brewing up something horrible: The escalation of the bloodbath in Ukraine, more deaths, the risk of a much wider world conflagration.

On the other hand, explosions against existing conditions are the order of the day, which always come as a “surprise” to official society: mass protests in France and Sri Lanka, walkouts by dockworkers in British Columbia and hotel workers in Los Angeles, the mass anger of betrayed postal workers in Britain, and many other eruptions of social anger.

The two processes coincide—barbaric reaction and social upheaval.

The only way out of the present impasse is the movement of the working class acting as a powerful, commanding international force, striving consciously for the socialist reorganization of society and culture. The answer to the horrors of war and the brutality of capitalism lies along this path.



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