

161,000 SAG-AFTRA members to strike in the US, joining 11,000 writers

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Pending a formality, a vote by the union's National Board, the 161,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) will go on strike Thursday. The tens of thousands of actors and other performers join the 11,000 writers, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), on strike since May 2. Voting with their feet, many actors have been joining the writers' picket-lines in recent weeks.

This is the largest indefinite strike in the US in decades and the largest in the history of US film and television production. The last time that writers and actors, then members of the Screen Actors Guild (the merger with AFTRA took place in 2012), were on strike, in 1960, SAG had only 13,000 members.

In their determination to take on some of the largest and most predatory corporations in the world—Disney, Amazon, Netflix, Fox, Apple, Warner Bros.—the writers and actors reflect the feelings and concerns of tens of millions in the US and beyond.

Interviewed Thursday morning, Disney CEO Bob Iger complained bitterly that the actors and writers had “a level of expectation... that is just not realistic.” Iger functions as the head of an organization with revenues of \$82 billion in 2022, which didn't prevent the corporation from laying off thousands of workers. Iger personally took in \$209,780,532 over the period 2018-2022. The Disney CEO arrogantly denounced the actors and writers Thursday for “adding to the set of the challenges that this business is already facing” and for being, “frankly, very disruptive.”

It is generally “disruptive” to the status quo when workers begin to demand what is rightfully theirs from corporate oligarchs who are used to having things their way. But things are changing. The working class is on the move, and Iger's disapproval will not stop that

development.

The SAG-AFTRA leadership was obliged to call a strike after delaying nearly two weeks, following the expiration of the contract June 30, in an entirely high-handed and undemocratic fashion. The union membership voted 98 percent to approve a strike in early June. Actors are suffering at the hands of the corporations, which have used the introduction of streaming and other means to drive down their incomes, and are further threatened by Artificial Intelligence and other technologies. Moreover, the actors, also hammered by inflation, have been angered by the companies' treatment of the writers, on strike for more than two months, who were in danger of facing the companies alone.

The Teamsters, IATSE and the other entertainment unions sought to isolate and sabotage the writers' strike by insuring that first the Directors Guild of America (DGA) signed a rotten deal, which the latter did, to be followed by the acquiescence of SAG-AFTRA officials, who showed every sign of following the same course. This was only “disrupted” by a semi-revolt of the membership.

An open letter, eventually signed by more than 2,000 actors, addressed to the SAG-AFTRA leadership in late June, essentially warned the union not to betray its members. The letter acknowledged that a strike would bring hardships, “but we are prepared to strike if it comes to that.” The signatories insisted that this was “not a moment to meet in the middle.” With “inflation and continued growth in streaming, we need a seismic realignment,” the letter argued, nothing less than a “transformative deal.” It addressed itself to the problems of “working class actors.”

This highly principled action threw a monkey wrench into the various unions' plans. This “disruptive force”

is nothing less than the working class acting in its own interests and foiling the best-laid plans of union bureaucrats and billionaire CEOs alike.

The SAG-AFTRA leadership was weakened in its efforts to block a strike by its own social indifference and bureaucratic cretinism. A video message sent out by president Fran Drescher and national executive director and chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, boasting about the “extremely productive” talks with management, was one of the danger signs that prompted the open letter protesting against an imminent sellout. That Drescher spent the weekend before the new contract deadline of July 12 “mugging for cameras” at a fashion show in Italy did not help the credibility of the union. It has essentially been dragged into calling a strike.

After claiming a few weeks ago that talks were going swimmingly, SAG-AFTRA was forced to admit Thursday in a message to its members that the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) “remains unwilling to offer a fair deal on the key issues that you told us are important to you.” Over the past decade, the union message went on, “your compensation has been severely eroded by the rise of the streaming ecosystem. Furthermore, artificial intelligence poses an existential threat to creative professions... Despite our team’s dedication to advocating on your behalf, the AMPTP has refused to acknowledge that enormous shifts in the industry and economy have had a detrimental impact on those who perform labor for the studios.”

In a press statement, Drescher was blunter, asserting that “the AMPTP’s responses to the union’s most important proposals have been insulting and disrespectful of our massive contributions to this industry. The companies have refused to meaningfully engage on some topics and on others completely stonewalled us.”

In a last-minute effort to forestall a strike, according to *Variety*, a group of top Hollywood executives, including officials from Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery and Netflix, met on a video call Monday evening “to discuss the urgent situation with SAG-AFTRA.” They subsequently reached an agreement with SAG-AFTRA to bring in a federal mediator on Wednesday. In addition, “talent agency chieftains including Ari Emanuel of WME, Bryan Lourd of CAA

and UTA’s Jeremy Zimmer have reached out to SAG-AFTRA leaders in recent days to offer assistance that could stave off a second Hollywood work stoppage this summer.” However, the union did not extend the contract deadline, as the AMPTP figures were seeking, and the one day of talks did nothing to resolve the issues.

“In the face of the AMPTP’s intransigence and delay tactics, SAG-AFTRA’s negotiating committee voted unanimously to recommend to the National Board a strike,” SAG-AFTRA explained. The union is holding a press conference at noon Pacific Time (3 p.m. Eastern Time) following the conclusion of the National Board vote.



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