

Tens of thousands of US film and television actors strike, joining 11,000 writers

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The National Board of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) voted unanimously Thursday afternoon to call a strike of the union’s tens of thousands of actors in the film and television industry for one minute past midnight Friday.

The film and television actors will 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 strike 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. The strike is part of a growing, broad-based movement of the working class.

This is a major political, social and cultural development. For the ruling elite and the financial oligarchy, the “double strike” is a blow. It reveals starkly that their decades-long ability—through the trade union bureaucracies in particular—to contain mass discontent, in the face of the destruction of jobs and benefits, soaring prices, relentless attacks on democratic rights and endless war, is breaking down.

The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) issued a lying and hypocritical statement. It claimed that the union had “decided to walk away from negotiations. This is the Union’s choice, not ours. ... Rather than continuing to negotiate, SAG-AFTRA has put us on a course that will deepen the financial hardship for thousands who depend on the industry for

their livelihoods.” This is the voice of the financial aristocracy, the corporate elite that destroys thousands of jobs and entire communities to increase its bottom line, without a second thought.

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, 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.

At a press conference Thursday afternoon, Drescher donned a new role, mouthing angry words about “employers [who] make Wall Street and greed their priority and [who] forget about the essential contributors that make the machine run. ... We are the victims here. We are being victimized by a very greedy entity. I am shocked by the way the people that we have been in business with are treating us... They stand on the wrong side of history at this very moment. ... Eventually, the people break down the gates of Versailles, and we’re at that moment now.”

No doubt the conduct of the companies is shocking, but this does not mean that the SAG-AFTRA leadership has been transformed into a fighting organization. As noted, it has been pulled into a conflict that it never wanted and did everything in its power to avoid. The union officialdom

may have been shaken by events but it is as politically bankrupt as it was a few weeks ago when it claimed everything was going swimmingly.

Now SAG-AFTRA was forced to admit Thursday in a message to its members that the 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.”

The joint strike of writer and actors is a powerful development in the international class struggle. The actors and writers take their place alongside the longshoremen in British Columbia, hotel workers in Los Angeles, millions of protesters in France and Sri Lanka, postal workers in the UK. Moreover, a strike against Disney and co. also has the character of a cultural revolt against the corporate stranglehold over film and television production. Series like *Succession*, *The Dropout* and *Dopesick* should be the rule, not the exception. For that, American society has to be reorganized along socialist lines. That requires a struggle against both big business parties and their program of poverty, war and authoritarianism.

The opportunities for writers and actors to turn broadly to the great mass of the working class have not been this favorable in many decades. America is truly a seething cauldron of discontent. The unions will do whatever they can to restrict and suppress the strike movement. The actors and writers, building their own democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, need to strike while the iron is hot and take actions independent of the SAG-AFTRA and WGA officials, including appealing directly to the rank and file of the Teamsters and IATSE. A mass mobilization and the complete shutdown of the entertainment industry is within the grasp of the tens of thousands of writers and actors.



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