

Australian entertainment union opposes industrial action to support striking US actors and writers

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Last Friday, the Media Entertainment Arts Alliance (MEAA) which covers thousands of actors, writers, technicians and other film industry workers in Australia, issued a press release on mass strike action by actors and scriptwriters in the US. Under a cynical cover of “solidarity,” the release was an instruction that MEAA members could not take any industrial action in support of their American colleagues.

The week-long ongoing walkout by 75,000 Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and scriptwriters has won powerful support from workers across the US and internationally. It has brought the multibillion-dollar US industry to a halt.

MEAA chief executive Erin Madeley declared that massive falls in residual payments and the threat to jobs posed by artificial intelligence (AI) were universal problems facing actors and scriptwriters everywhere. Their struggle “is our struggle,” she continued, “and a win in Hollywood will set the standard for improvements for screen performers around the world.”

Madeley’s press release, however, was not a call for MEAA members to take industrial action in support of their striking brothers and sisters in the US but the opposite. The press release was followed by an eight-point Q&A statement directing actors, writers and crew working on American film and television productions in Australia not to strike in support of US film and entertainment workers.

It was “not the MEAA’s decision” to have Australian actors and crew stood down to support the US strike, the Q&A statement said. The MEAA “has not called a strike and has no ability to determine whether or not our members are stood down by producers...”

“For Australian actors and crew engaged on Australian screen productions with no imported US performers/SAG-AFTRA members, there will be no change and your work will continue as normal.”

If productions are halted as a result of strike action by

SAG-AFTRA members, the statement added, MEAA members could be stood down without pay under Australia’s Fair Work Act or terminated with one week’s pay depending on previous work agreements negotiated by the union.

No action should be taken to fight these stand-downs or terminations, but members could contact the union with “any questions about their rights and entitlements,” the statement said.

And how should Australian film and entertainment workers support striking US actors and writers, the MEAA statement press release cynically asked?

“Throughout the coming weeks, MEAA will provide opportunities to come together to take a photo to show collective solidarity.”

In other words, stay on the job, ensuring that current US entertainment productions are completed without any hitches.

Class-conscious striking actors and writers in the US and their fellow workers in Australia will rightly recognise the MEAA’s directives as strike breaking. It was a direct message to the US entertainment corporation chiefs that the MEAA would do all it could to prevent any interruption to their productions and profits.

The MEAA’s response is not a sudden aberration. It is of a piece with the actions of Actors Equity, the MEAA’s predecessor, which called for quotas on foreign actors and technicians and other national protectionist measures for most of the twentieth century.

Unable to prevent the extraordinary globalisation of film production and the dominance of giant entertainment corporations, the MEAA works hand in glove with these and local production houses to make Australian production facilities “internationally competitive.”

The union’s modus operandi has nothing to do with defending its members but are the operations of an

organisation that functions as a virtual national labour hire agency, guaranteeing industrial peace and maximum profits.

For years, the MEAA has been involved in a race to the bottom to lower production costs in order to attract film industry investment into Australia. This has also involved constant calls on Australian federal and state governments—Liberal-National and Labor alike—to boost existing tax breaks, location subsidies and offsets for blockbuster film productions.

The Albanese Labor government's May budget this year almost doubled its location offsets from 16.5 percent to 30 percent for international entertainment companies shooting in Australia. Overjoyed MEAA chief Madeley hailed the increase as a "real breakthrough" that would provide "certainty and competitiveness," and praised the Labor government for finally "understanding what our industry needs to thrive."

The total volume of international film and television projects filmed in Australia in 2020–21 increased by 114 percent to just over \$1 billion. The previous five-year average of foreign location filming was \$273 million.

According to industry analysts, federal governments have provided almost \$4 billion to offshore productions shot in Australia in the past 15 years. These handouts are to companies already making massive profits. In 2022, Disney made \$US28.7 billion profit, Warner Bros \$13.4 billion and Paramount \$10.3 billion.

Under Australian legislation introduced in the early 1990s, the MEAA is involved in overseeing visa applications lodged for overseas actors and technicians by offshore entertainment companies planning to shoot in Australia. Without MEAA approval and payment of union consultancy fees the project, and related visa applications, cannot proceed. In the 2014–15 financial year, over \$400,000 was paid to the union in this sort of consultancy.

This union-industry collaboration is not confined to overseas entertainment producers shooting in Australia. The MEAA has supervised decades of job destruction redundancy deals and workload increases across the country in state-funded and private broadcasting, as well as newspapers and publishing and the live performance of musicians and artists.

During the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the union collaborated with music, drama and dance company managers to impose severe wage cuts and pay freezes, boasting that its deals had set a precedent in the entertainment and arts sector.

The US strike has immediately impacted three film productions in Australia—*Apples Never Fall*, starring Annette Bening and Sam Neil, *Mortal Kombat 2* and *Force of Nature: The Dry 2*, written and directed by Robert

Connolly.

Apples Never Fall was due to begin shooting but stopped after Annette Bening flew back to the US to join the strike, while the promotional appearances for the release of *Force of Nature: The Dry 2* were cancelled when Eric Bana (*Munich* and *Romulus, My Father*), its producer and lead Australian actor, supported the US strikers.

Cancellation of his movie's release, Bana said, was "with some regret, but a large amount of conviction... I stand in support of the changes that SAG-AFTRA are fighting for on behalf of all working actors." Bana's principled response and the forceful comments from US strikers being published by the *World Socialist Web Site* stand in stark contrast to the MEAA's reactionary call for its members to keep working.

The ongoing joint strike action by SAG-AFTRA members and scriptwriters is winning powerful support from workers in the US and internationally, sharply revealing that workers in this global industry face the same issues and posing the necessity for internationally unified action against the giant corporations that control their sector.

The MEAA's opposition to any mobilisation of Australian entertainment workers makes clear the necessity for these workers to organise independently of the nationally based unions, which are tied economically and politically by thousands of threads to the profit system.

Australian actors, scriptwriters and associated workers must reject the MEAA directives and initiate joint online meetings with their striking brothers and sisters in the US. In opposition to the backroom manoeuvres of the unions, open and wide-ranging discussions must begin about the development of a globally coordinated fight to defeat the employers' attacks on jobs, wages, conditions and basic rights.



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