

Stage and screen workers rally in London to support SAG-AFTRA strike

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Hundreds of actors, writers, directors and film, television, and theatre workers rallied in London Friday in solidarity with their striking colleagues in the United States. It was the largest protest by Equity union members in history, supporting the first combined strike by actors and writers in the US since 1960.

At Leicester Square, in the heart of London's West End, members of Equity, Bectu (Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union) and other unions covering workers in the creative industry gathered, buoyed by a fight pitting tens of thousands of US actors and writers against corporate giants such as Warner Bros., Disney and streaming companies Netflix, Apple and Amazon that control film and television production globally.

An all-out strike by members of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) began July 14, joining 11,000 members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) out since May 2. The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) has rejected demands for an 11 percent pay rise, protections against the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and fair distribution of streaming revenue for writers and performers.

Equity has instructed its 40,000 members to honour Equity and SAG-AFTRA contracts in the UK, to protect them from legal action under Britain's anti-strike laws which make solidarity strikes, pickets or secondary boycotts illegal. But the desire for united action is unmistakable. Chants of "One struggle, one fight, we support SAG-AFTRA's strike!" rang across the square at Friday's rally. It was a fitting location, beneath the famous statue of William Shakespeare (a copy of Peter Scheemakers' in Westminster Abbey) inscribed with the words from *Twelfth Night*, "There is no darkness but ignorance."

Veteran actors Brian Cox, Imelda Staunton and Jim Carter held up Equity's main banner, alongside Simon Pegg, David Oyelowo, Andy Serkis, Naomie Harris and Hayley Atwell.

American comedian, actor and writer Rob Delaney emceed the rally. He said it was funny about laws blocking sympathy strikes in the UK, because he was on a SAG film at Pinewood studios just outside London, "shutdown by the strikes."

To cheers and laughter, he announced, "We're gonna withhold our labour, and we're gonna get our win. We're gonna get our tiny little slice of the pie, the pie we made up the freaking recipe for, and wrote the cookbook for, and posed for the funny pictures with the pie."

Describing the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) as boastful "toddlers," Delaney said, "They have these earnings calls, and they talk about their subscriber numbers and these blockbuster numbers, then we ask for a nickel and they're like, 'oh no, we don't have any'. Well which one is true? We know which one is true."

Cox, who played media tycoon Logan Roy in *Succession*, told the rally, "I think we're at the thin end of a really horrible wedge." While Britain's National Health Service was "under siege," Cox explained that SAG-AFTRA members relied on residuals to pay for private healthcare.

AI was an even bigger threat. Cox said a friend on a supporting artist's contract had recently been told by a TV show "that they would keep his image and do what they like with it. Now that is a completely unacceptable position, and that is the position that we should be really fighting against."

Linda Rook, President of Equity, said that US screen and television performers were "fighting for the

survival of our profession.” There was not a line drawn “down the middle of the Atlantic Ocean that says the problem stops there,” she said, describing a “shared fight” by Equity and the entire working class. But, she continued, “joining in strike action in the UK is not lawful because since Margaret Thatcher’s government we have some of the most draconian and restrictive anti-trade union laws in the western world.”

Equity General Secretary Paul Fleming echoed Rook’s message on the anti-strike laws, but neither could explain why Equity has failed to call a lawful ballot for strike action to fight the same exploitative conditions being imposed across the film and television industry in Britain. If Equity and Bectu members struck alongside US actors and writers right now (not in six months’ time) it would paralyse Netflix and Disney etc., but this potential is being blocked.

Equity will do nothing to rock the boat. Both it and Bectu have presided over worsening conditions for their members over decades, acquiescing to the demands of the major studios and their financial backers.

An estimated 1.6 million people work in creative industries in the UK. They generate £42 billion a year in London alone, supporting one in six jobs there. But the sector is on a knife’s edge. At the end of last year, Arts Council England announced cuts of £50 million a year to London-based arts organisations for 2023-2026, with many national theatre and opera bodies losing 100 percent of state support. Funding for culture is down 46 percent in real terms since 2005.

A survey by WeTransfer last November found nearly two thirds of UK creatives in full-time employment “are concerned about job security and looking to take on an extra job in the next 12 months to make ends meet.” It found 44 percent of creative workers had used their savings to pay bills in the previous six months, while 35 percent went into overdraft. A massive 50 percent of freelance and self-employed creatives reported they could no longer cover essential bills.

A special warning must be made about the efforts of Equity, Bectu and other unions to promote a future Labour government as saviour. Former shadow chancellor under Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell, told the rally, “There will be a general election in 15 months’ time... let’s make it clear to Keir Starmer [that in] the first hundred days we need the anti-strike laws

scrapped.” This demanded of a Labour leader who has threatened to sack any MP who visits a picket line! McDonnell’s shameless touting is part of concerted efforts by the labour and trade union bureaucracy to subordinate the working class to the most right-wing Labour government in history. Starmer has already declared that “there is no magic money tree” and that “Labour is the party of NATO.”

Artists spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*, readily identifying with recent strikes by rail workers, NHS staff and teachers, and mass strikes and protests in France and the United States. But bitter lessons are being drawn by workers over the past year’s strike wave, ruthlessly betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy. One of the biggest cheers at the rally was for Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) official Eddie Dempsey. But the RMT has worked behind the scenes with the train operating companies and the Sunak government agreeing major attacks on workers’ pay, terms and conditions. Not long after the Friday’s rally, the RMT again called off strikes on the London Underground.

The strike by US actors and writers is having a global impact. It is strengthening the instinctive understanding in the working class that the problems it confronts are global in character and that a global solution is needed to challenge the dictates of the financial oligarchy. Left-wing ideas—egalitarianism, opposition to greed and selfishness, anger and revulsion toward capitalism and its destructive impact on the creative process and the fate of the planet—are again taking hold of artists.



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