

Australian movie workers back US strike and speak out on poor conditions

Mike Head
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About 100 film industry workers, including actors and musicians, gathered outside the Village Roadshow movie studios on Australia's Gold Coast on Monday to send a photo message of support to their striking American co-workers.

They are among the more than 800 actors and other workers that the studio giants have laid-off in the state of Queensland alone since the start of the US strike, leaving them without income and more dependent than ever on working multiple other casual jobs to survive.

In video interviews with the WSWs, young actors spoke about the crucial nature of the US strike for the future of the conditions of movie and arts workers in Australia and internationally, and explained how bad these conditions are already.

They spoke passionately about why they back the 11,000 writers in the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and 65,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) in their now 14-week-long fight against the major networks and studios represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

Their comments show how much is at stake in this first joint strike by US writers and actors in 60 years. They said that if the studios could use artificial intelligence (AI) to replace actors and writers in the United States, and keep reducing residual payments to virtually zero, that would soon spread throughout all the arts, and not just the movie and television industry.

In their interviews, four actors and crew—Greta, Nick, Tianna and Eric—explained the highly-exploited conditions in which they work, while the studios make massive profits and executives enjoy huge pay packets.

Eric, for example, spoke about extras or stand-in actors being treated “like meat.” They get called in at a day's notice, have to start as early as 5a.m. and must even

provide their own costumes. They often work off scripts handed to them at the last minute, and then get cast aside if they make a mistake. If they do not accept such conditions, they get “blacklisted” by their agents. He said it was time for actors to speak up in what had become a “cut throat” industry.

The actors said most of them have to rely on three or four other casual jobs in the “gig economy” in order to live, and cannot accept alternative permanent employment for fear of missing their chances to work in the artistic field they love.

They said conditions in the industry had worsened. The pay was low and even actors who had appeared in popular TV series now received tiny or zero residual payments.

A musician, Malcolm, told the WSWs that work in the industry was increasingly scarce.

The photo shoot was organised by the Media Entertainment Arts Alliance (MEAA) which covers thousands of actors, writers, technicians and other film industry workers in Australia. As far as the union was concerned, it was a short photo “call.”

The event lasted only a few minutes. An MEAA official spoke briefly to thank them for participating. She brushed aside a question from one member about what the union was doing to support the US strike.

On July 14, the MEAA issued a press release on the US dispute. While professing “solidarity,” the release instructed MEAA members not to take any industrial action in support of their American colleagues.

Movie and entertainment workers in Australia and their colleagues globally could quickly shut down the studios, as the joint strike has done in the US, confronting the companies with a unified stand internationally.

Instead, the MEAA statement gave the green light for productions to continue as normal, even “where SAG-AFTRA members have been engaged on Australian productions or on standard MEAA Equity-SPA

Agreements (such as the AFFCA or ATPA).”

None of the laid-off workers have received any strike pay or financial support from the MEAA. The union opposes any action to fight the stand-downs. Its release said that if productions shut down as a result of the SAG-AFTRA strike, “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.”

The US strike has a critical class and ideological content. Hitting the heart of the “cut throat” capitalist entertainment industry headquartered in the United States, it is part of a developing global struggle by workers across all key industries against the ever-more ruthless profit demands of the corporate elite.

The MEAA, however, is integrated into big business. It works closely with the studios and the Australian federal and state governments, which offer lucrative incentives and subsidies to the studios to shoot productions locally. Under these arrangements, the MEAA receives hundreds of thousands of dollars annually in fees to oversee visa applications lodged for foreign actors and technicians.

Industry analysts estimate that federal governments have handed over almost \$4 billion in the past 15 years to companies already making hefty profits. In 2022, for instance, Disney made \$US28.7 billion.

The site of Monday’s event typifies the industry’s domination by finance capital. Village Roadshow, majority owned by private equity company BGH Capital, boasts that its Gold Coast complex is the largest studio lot in the Southern Hemisphere.

The MEAA’s opposition to any action by Australian entertainment workers shows the need to organise against the corporate giants independently of the national-based unions. Workers should initiate online discussions with the strikers in the US to develop a globally-coordinated fight to defeat the mounting offensive against jobs, wages, conditions and basic rights.



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