

Film industry workers in Australia call for unified global action to support striking US scriptwriters and actors

Our reporters
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Actors and film industry workers in Australia spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* this week voicing their support for striking writers and actors in the US and pointing out that they all face the same attacks on their jobs, wages, and conditions.

Several described the hand-to-mouth existence of most entertainment workers and the threat to their jobs posed by Artificial Intelligence (AI) software. Some spoke in opposition to the refusal of the Media Entertainment Arts Alliance (MEAA) to mobilise its Australian members in unified industrial action with the US strikers from the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA).

Igor, an actor, spent four years in London attending drama school and attempting to get work in the entertainment industry. Poor wages and impossibly high rents and other living costs forced him to return home to Australia.

“I think the actors and writers in the US made an absolutely necessary decision to go on strike. There needs to be global action against global corporations. I really love that idea. Unity is important on every level because as actors we all know that the best art and outcomes happen when we all work together.

“We need to stop these billion-dollar corporations walking all over us. Most of them don’t have a creative soul in their body and yet they’re deciding what movies are made and who gets the work for the privileged few actors who are already millionaires.

“As actors we’re part of the working class, but it seems that we’re supposed to cop it from the companies. When times are bad, we cop it, and when times are good, we still cop it. Statements by the production companies that they will starve actors and writers back to work make clear the predatory and parasitic nature of the layer that own these companies. It’s how they think.

“None of the actors I know have full-time work. For the last four years I’ve dedicated myself solely to acting and went overseas to London to study theatre and film. To get auditions you need to have a prestigious agent, but to get prestigious agents you need to already have a career. Everyone has to do part-time shitty jobs, generally working in hospitality, to pay the rent and with many living in shared accommodation.

“When I was studying, I worked part-time in a bar. I would study and attend classes from 10.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. then work in a bar until 11.30 or midnight, go home, and then start all over. Sometimes at weekends I’d work 12- or 14-hours shifts but the wages were pathetic. It’s impossible to survive in London and you’re constantly under

financial stress.

“Classes for 16 months cost me nearly £12,000 which meant you needed to work continuously. It’s absolutely grueling and stressful, and once the war in Ukraine began everything went up—inflation, food and rent—but no increases in wages.

“At one stage I was loading trucks for concerts like a roadie and only getting about £11.50 an hour, which equates to about \$21 Australian. The one-off penalty rate was £10 a night. I shared a house with three people. It had mold on the walls and one month we got a gas and electricity bill for £300 and so we decided we could only have the heating on for one hour a day, between 8.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m.

“I’ve come back to Melbourne, where I have some family support, in order to survive. I currently have two jobs here—none in acting—one is casual and the other part-time.”

Catherine, who works in the film industry in Adelaide, South Australia sent a comment, which read in part:

“Writers are the foundational element of some of the most lucrative products in the world. Their union contracts are designed to ensure writers can make a living wage from their art and labour but compensation for their work has been consistently eaten away by the greed of the studios, the production companies and the streaming services that are making huge profits off the back of the writers’ labour.

“The strike is looking to protect the workers incomes against corporate greed and the looming challenge of AI. While the effects of the strike are likely to adversely affect all of the people who work in the entertainment industry, the strike is necessary to ensure writers are able to make a living...

“The choice of the Australian union [the MEAA] to continue working is disappointing, because Australian writers face many of the same challenges as their American counterparts. United action will enhance collective bargaining power and amplify the impact of the strike’s demands.

“If the writers can create a global movement, then it can be shown that the issue is of significant concern to the entire writing community, putting more pressure on the employers to negotiate. United action fosters a sense of solidarity and helps create a support system, attract media attention and enhance visibility, potentially gaining widespread public support. The financial impact of a halt in production can also strengthen the incentive for employers to find an equitable resolution.”

Estella, an actor currently living in Melbourne, has worked in the film and entertainment industry in the US, Australia and the UK. She emailed the following statement:

“I stand in solidarity with the writers and the millions of workers all across the world who have little savings, insecure employment and declining wages but who are starting to say that enough is enough.

“The US actors and writers strike is incredibly inspiring for me as someone who follows socialist politics and is involved in the arts. Art is inextricably linked to the struggle for a better life and to human liberation and I am so proud of my American comrades who have taken a huge step forward. I’m hoping that it inspires workers from other industries all over the world to rise up.

“I’ve had enough of this brutal system that destroys human bonds, attacks genuine art, distorts, perverts and limits progressive thought, handicaps any movement forward and systematically destroys our health, our minds and our futures. Our industry has gone from making *Citizen Kane*, *The Sweet Smell of Success*, *Monsieur Verdoux*, and other great movies to *Mission Impossible* and *Barbie*.

“I denounce the Australian entertainment union for not striking in solidarity. If they are not on the side of art and then they are not on the side of the working class.”

Kevin Hopkins has worked in the entertainment industry for over 30 years, as an actor, director and recently a teacher of acting. An ensemble member of the Australian Shakespeare company for over 25 years, he works each year for the Prague Shakespeare Company and in June co-directed *Titus Andronicus* in Prague.

Hopkins said the US actors and screenwriters striking had global significance. “This is really relevant to Australian artists, especially with the AI element of the strike,” he said.

“I was with some American actors last week in Prague and all of them are outraged about how they’re being treated and the dubious contracts they’ve been offered. They’re members of SAG and are now on strike. The big production companies are trying to enforce new rules, especially related to artificial intelligence and the ownership of someone’s image in perpetuity once you work on something. This is now being built into a lot of contracts.

“The MEAA says it’s in solidarity with the scriptwriters and SAG members strike but this doesn’t mean anything unless it’s actually doing something about it. I see other actors in other countries walking out and striking in solidarity with US actors and scriptwriters. We should be doing the same here,” Hopkins continued.

“This is a global issue. I think unions around the world need to stand together and fight, but the MEAA just won’t do that. I was a union member for 25 years but left because I found it more and more difficult to reconcile with its national protectionist positions. I’m an internationalist but it doesn’t believe in that. It believes in national boundaries and 10 years ago, when I left the union, it wouldn’t allow international artists in. It was ‘Australian content for Australian audiences.’

“The numbers quoted in the WWSWS about how much profit the big companies are making in film and especially TV are just astounding. Disney and Netflix and others are making billions of dollars profit. The production companies hunt around for the cheapest and best location and they’re really pushing forward for Australia to make more films here. We therefore have a responsibility to stand up on the global stage and say, ‘Australia is exactly the same as the US.’”

Linda, a Sydney artist and former film actor who recently retired as

a voice actor, said: “What’s important about this strike is that the big-name actors are actually standing up for the little guys—the extras and background people—who’ll be hit first, and hit the hardest.

“There’s a myth that if you’re a successful Hollywood actor you earn millions of dollars, or at least you’re doing very well. But if you’re not an A-lister then you don’t get a living wage and there’s plenty of stories of actors living in their cars. Many negative things could be said about the old studio system but at least actors were given a living wage, regardless of whether they were working or not.

“Every actor I’ve ever known has always had another job and when they get paid, it goes straight back into the system to pay for show reels, for acting classes and things like that. Back in the day you’d go to a casting agent, and they’d film your audition. Now you pay for your casting costs, including props, or audition reels, and you get someone to film and edit the footage.

“I worked for twenty years as a voice actor but retired during COVID-19 because we were being saddled with all sorts of costs. Even before the pandemic, clients started wanting us to record our own auditions and our own material. When COVID hit these costs became prohibitive and saw voiceover artists faced with spending thousands of dollars setting up home studios. It wasn’t viable and now the agencies can eliminate these sorts of jobs with AI.

“I’d like to speak about the extras because they are overlooked, particularly in Australian film culture. They’re looked down upon and referred to as ‘background’ and will be regarded by the production companies as collateral damage.

“I’m not surprised the MEAA isn’t calling for support industrial action here. The union is tied up with the entertainment and media industry corporations. Look at how it has responded to the persecution of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange. He’s a member of the MEAA and faces extradition and a possible life-time jail sentence in the US, and all the union has done—issue a few press releases.

“Actors and film and television industry workers should be setting up their own picket lines and taking action to support the US strike. There’s a sort of normalising ‘it won’t happen here’ bias in Australia but entertainment workers should be warned that what’s happening in the US entertainment industry, and the increasing use of AI is coming here, and much faster than they realise.”



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