

Democratic politicians threaten to intervene against writers and actors as “dual strike” enters fourth week

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8 August 2023

For nearly 100 days, in scorching heat, some 10,000 members of Writers Guild of America (WGA) have been on strike. Roughly 60,000 members of Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, (SAG-AFTRA) joined striking writers last month, in the process shutting down major productions not only in the United States, but around the world.

In the last two weeks, top Democratic Party politicians, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and California Governor Gavin Newsom, have issued statements offering to broker a deal between striking actors and writers and the studios represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

On July 26, multiple media outlets confirmed that governor Newsom, who previously offered to mediate an agreement when the writers’ strike first began on May 2, had again reached out to studio executives and top level union bureaucrats to offer his assistance in brokering a deal.

“It’s clear that the sides are still far apart, but [Newsom] is deeply concerned about the impact a prolonged strike can have on the regional and state economy,” Anthony York, Newsom’s senior adviser for communications told AP last month. York said both Newsom, and “senior members” of his administration had been in contact with both sides all summer.

Newsom is far from an impartial mediator. According to OpenSecrets, among the top contributors to Newsom’s 2021 recall campaign were studio and production companies such as Dreamworks (\$97,200), Bad Robot Productions (\$64,800), Chuck Lorre Productions (\$64,800) and Netflix (\$62,500). Reed Hastings, the co-founder of Netflix, also gave Newsom \$3 million in 2021.

The very next week on August 4, Mayor Bass released a worried statement saying the strike had reached an “important inflection point” and was causing “ripple effects throughout our economy as well as that of the state and country.”

“It is critical,” Bass declared, “that this gets resolved immediately so that Los Angeles gets back on track.” The former California Representative, one of 211 Democrats that voted with 79 Republicans to block the railroad strike last year declared, “I stand ready to personally engage with all the stakeholders in any way possible to help get this done.”

Bass’s declaration must be taken as a serious warning by striking workers. As she did with the striking Los Angeles school workers earlier this year, Bass and the Democratic Party, with their adjuncts in the trade union bureaucracies, are seeking to strangle the strike and impose a contract.

On Tuesday, Bass responded to the one-day strike by 11,000 Los Angeles municipal workers against low pay and exhausting work schedules by implementing an emergency service plan and pledging, “The city of Los Angeles is not going to shut down.”

Newsom and Bass are just the latest in a steady march of Democratic Party politicians and union bureaucrats to intervene in the ongoing entertainment workers’ strike. Last month, New York Representative and fellow railroad strikebreaker Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez visited a New York picket with AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler.

In addition to Newsom and Bass, other prominent Democrats have also been floated as possible “mediators,” including the Second Gentleman (Vice President Kamala Harris’s husband) Doug Emhoff. Emhoff owns a home in wealthy Burbank, California and is a former corporate lawyer that represented major entertainment companies as well as “pharmaceutical giant Merck and Dolarian Capital, an arms dealer, in a case related to the sale of weapons in Afghanistan,” according to the *New York Times*.

To counter the maneuvers of the Democrats, it is imperative that striking workers form rank-and-file committees to transfer decision-making and power from the WGA and SAG-AFTRA trade union bureaucracies to workers themselves. The committees should draw up workers’ own demands and

nominate trusted and militant workers to oversee negotiations, which must be livestreamed, not held behind closed doors. Workers must be prepared to defeat any attempt by the union bureaucracy and the Democrats to ram through another pro-company contract. At the same time, actors and writers must unite with hotel and city workers, UPS and port workers, and other sections of workers to launch an industrial and political counter-offensive.

Last week the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Ken, a striking member of SAG-AFTRA. Like virtually all working actors, Ken can not subsist on the meager wages he makes from his craft and is forced to work a second job at a major retailer. After suffering an injury on the job last year, Ken will be returning to his second job next week.

“If I wasn’t going back to my 9 to 5 job in a week and a half, I’d be worried. There’s a lot of people who are. I hear people talking about, when I leave picketing, ‘I’ve got to go to a food bank up the block and get a box of food.’

“I’ve been on workers’ comp since January and I had to cash in my stock so as to not starve. Now, I have none left. With workers’ comp, you still have to pay your health insurance to keep it up because workers’ comp doesn’t cover it.

“I pay \$110 every two weeks out of pocket, and in January and March, because of the extra Wednesdays in the month, I had to pay \$330. I’d been getting extensions on my electric and phone bills, and I said, ‘Screw this, I’m just going to cash in my stock, I don’t have to worry anymore.’ When I cashed it in, I had less than \$100 in savings and less than \$50 in my checking account.”

Like the overwhelming majority of working actors, Ken does not meet the current \$26,470 threshold to qualify for insurance. “I have Kaiser. I have the best insurance plan I can get from [the company]. Some of these people, you have to earn something like \$29,000 a year minimum to be vested and that just gets you insurance for the *next year*.”

“You earned 25, 29 grand this year, next year you’re eligible for SAG insurance. Well, I need insurance *today*. They’re making that plateau so high and work is so scarce and sparse, how is somebody supposed to be able to get that? I’m in a few Facebook groups with background actors, and all people talk about is, ‘Where do I sign up for COBRA (Continuation of Health Coverage)’ and, ‘What do I do?’ ‘What are your side hustles, what are the jobs you folks are doing?’ I see these people doing these little tidbit things to make ends meet.

“It’s sad that folks work so hard, but don’t clear that threshold to be able to get health insurance. I’m 56 and I’m glad I have insurance. I can go get a checkup like I did yesterday and get a

physical. If I had to pay out-of-pocket, it would have been a couple hundred bucks. So I might have put it off. What if I have something going on and I’m putting off my physical because I don’t have money?

“You know, one of the perks to joining SAG is they tell you, you get great insurance, but they don’t tell you when you join how much you have to earn to get it.”

Ken said in addition to substantial pay raises, any tentative agreement must include cost-of-living increases. “If the cost of living goes up, my pay should go up. It should be tied to inflation. Whenever inflation goes up, your pay goes up.”

Like many striking workers, such as actress and comedian Sarah Silverman, Ken denounced “side-agreements” that some actors, with the blessing of SAG-AFTRA, have engaged in with non-AMPTP studios.

“I haven’t heard too much about what it entails, but I have heard that’s what’s going on,” Ken said. “They’ve sought loopholes and figured it out.” Asked by this reporter if he thought these deals undercut the strike, Ken replied, “1,000 percent. It’s like, ‘What are you doing?!’

“I think Sarah Silverman called them out on it. What the hell? Why are you shooting a film? Okay, the film I guess is not under the umbrella of something that can be struck. But you’re just defying the whole principle of what we’re trying to do.”

Reflecting on the international support American workers have received from their Australian co-workers Ken replied, “Yeah, in Queensland! I think that’s amazing and that’s great. Talk about solidarity! I wore my strike shirt to my doctor’s appointment yesterday, the doctors and nurses were like, ‘Hey, we’re all for the strike,’ so it’s a lot of people getting it and they understand what’s going on. You have the UPS and hotel workers and we are all fighting for the same thing.”



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