

Writers Guild of America seeks to sabotage strike as secret in-person negotiations continue

Jacob Crosse, Hong Jian, Karsten Schneider
15 August 2023

The over 100-day strike by US film and television writers, which was joined by thousands of actors last month in the first “dual strike” in decades, is in danger of a major sellout.

On Tuesday, industry publication *Deadline* reported that negotiators with the Writers Guild of America (WGA) were meeting in person, behind closed doors, with their counterparts from the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

This past Friday, the WGA resumed negotiations with the AMPTP for only the second time since the strike began on May 2. At the Friday meeting, the AMPTP presented the WGA with a proposed agreement that WGA negotiators are responding to in person.

In an update published early Tuesday evening, *Deadline* reported that a “well-placed source” said the meeting concluded with “mixed results.”

After the meeting on Friday, August 11, the WGA released a statement stating it would keep the AMPTP’s proposal a secret from the writers and that negotiations would continue next week. Seeking to justify leaving their members in the dark, WGA bureaucrats claimed, “Sometimes more progress can be made in negotiations when they are conducted without a blow-by-blow description of the moves on each side and a subsequent public dissection of the meaning of the moves.”

For an example of the type of “progress” that is made in these secret negotiations, writers should recall the events that preceded the conclusion of the writers strike 15 years ago, which ended in a major sellout that set the stage for the current struggle.

In one article posted by *Los Angeles Times* in February 2008, the paper noted the “private overtures” that “led to strike breakthrough.”

Recalling the role of then chief negotiator of the WGA, John Bowman, the *Times* noted that leading up to the deal, Bowman was wined and dined by major studio executives in meetings held at wealthy executives’ homes, high-powered lawyers’ estates and even breakfast “at the Luxe Hotel in Brentwood...”

There is no reason to believe that WGA negotiators are not engaged in similar sordid affairs, which is why they feel

compelled to keep the rank and file out of the loop. While the union has refused to provide its membership with the details of the proposed agreement, leaks have begun to trickle out confirming that the studio’s proposal is woefully inadequate and even fails to meet the WGA’s already insufficient initial demands.

Bloomberg reported that the offer includes a 5 percent pay increase the first year, 1 percent less than the 6 percent the WGA had asked for, which is still well below inflation and completely inadequate for the sky-high cost of living in Los Angeles and New York. *Bloomberg* also reported that while writers will have some access to viewership data on streaming platforms, their compensation, such as residuals, will not be tied to that data.

Variety reported that the AMPTP’s “economic terms” to the WGA would mirror the terms dictated to the Directors Guild of America, which includes a 21 percent increase in streaming residuals.

While WGA negotiators are attempting to find a path to sell a rotten deal to their members, the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy has been coming under increasing pressure from actors because of its issuance of “interim agreements.” The majority of the rank and file, along with several prominent actors, have been refusing work and marching on the picket lines, while certain productions have been given waivers by the union that allow members to scab on the strike.

The union has also carved out a plethora of exceptions and rules that even allows members to continue working with companies represented by the AMPTP, such as Apple and the program *Tehran*. These agreements are a massive betrayal of striking workers and have been met with such overwhelming opposition that the union was forced to call an online meeting last week in an attempt to placate anger.

In the meeting last week and in subsequent interviews with major press outlets, SAG-AFTRA bureaucrats, such as executive director and chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland (\$1,023,293 salary in 2022), have attempted to justify the waivers as a “strategic” part of the strike. SAG-AFTRA said the agreements demonstrated “to the AMPTP that other

producers are eager to work with our members under these terms.”

Crabtree-Ireland’s justifications did not hold water with members, who peppered him with questions for over two hours before SAG-AFTRA ended the meeting.

“Isn’t the simple fact that the AMPTP knows that projects are being made right now undermine our leverage because they know that however long the strike goes on, on the other side, there will be a glut of content to choose from?” asked one striking worker. Another questioned, “Why wasn’t the concept of interim agreements broached with members before implementing the strike authorization vote, and why weren’t we informed prior to the rollout?”

In response to the growing opposition among workers, on Monday, SAG-AFTRA announced that while the 207 current projects under the “interim agreements” would go forward, the union would no longer issue any “interim agreements” with US-based projects that were written under a WGA contract.

Seeking to present the facade of solidarity among the union bureaucracy in order to divert attention away from the duplicitous role of the union in undercutting the strike, “MembershipFirst,” a previous oppositional faction to the current Fran Drescher-Crabtree-Ireland regime, announced at the end of June that it would join with the current leadership in a “UNITY” ticket for the upcoming 2023 elections.

This faux solidarity is aimed at blocking and opposing any dissent among the rank and file.

In a further effort to keep workers isolated and uninformed, bureaucrats from both striking unions have told workers to not speak to the press or read articles by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Nevertheless, last Thursday WSWS reporters spoke with striking workers outside the Netflix and Warner Bros. offices in New York, while on Friday, WSWS reporters interviewed actors and writers on the picket line at Paramount Studios.

In New York, several actors told the WSWS they opposed the waivers granted by SAG-AFTRA. “I am against these interim agreements that the union has allowed,” one actor, who wished to remain anonymous, said.

“We need a total work stoppage,” she continued. “There’s a real disconnect between the members of the SAG-AFTRA board and the membership. The bottom line is that the bottom half of the union is left out. The union is very much in touch with the celebrities.

“We need to make \$800 for an eight-hour day by 2027. We need to strike to make that happen.

“The board has no term limits,” she continued, “so you have a collection of retired actors, completely unaware of the problems facing working actors, using these board seats as a coffee klatsch.”

In Los Angeles, Randall, an actor-writer, said the interim agreements were, “controversial. ... Although it’s only supposed to affect studios that have no ties to the AMPTP, we can’t really say there’s no overlap.”

In response to the anger expressed by striking workers, a number of A-list actors have recently backed away from working on projects that were given waivers. Randall said, “I know Viola Davis stepped away from her film, *G20*, even though that film was given a waiver. I think that’s the right call from her.”

Bryson, who has been a SAG-AFTRA member for five years, commented: “If we don’t stand up for this, who else will? We’ve gone to school for this. We’ve dedicated our lives to our art. There’s a lot of work that we put into this, and for us not to be compensated for the work we’ve put in, that’s ridiculous. The studios are trying to push us to desperation to the point where we won’t be able to live, to survive. What we do is important. We change lives. We can’t stop now. We have to continue to stand up for what we do.”

To stand up to the AMPTP, actors and writers will have to oppose their union leadership, which has been working from the start with strikebreaking Democrats to divide and isolate workers from their natural allies. The same threats of automation, job loss and miserly pay affect every section of the working class. In many instances, writers and actors are striking against the same companies that enforce terrible working conditions for workers around the world, from Apple to Amazon.

In order to break through the stranglehold of the unions and prevent another rotten sell-out, it is imperative that workers immediately establish lines of communication between striking workers and organize democratically controlled rank-and-file committees that are independent of the bureaucracy and the two parties of big business, who are doing everything in their power behind the scenes to end the strike.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact