

SAG-AFTRA and WGA strike

US writers, actors rally as unions prepare betrayal: More than ever, the need for rank-and-file committees!

Gabriel Black
23 August 2023

Thousands of striking actors and writers rallied across the US on Tuesday during a so-called “National Day of Solidarity.” Writers have been on strike for almost four months and actors for almost two, in a historic “dual strike,” the like of which has not been seen since 1960.

The Day of Solidarity called by the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and the Writers Guild of America (WGA), in collaboration with the AFL-CIO, reflected two opposing forces or social tendencies.

On the one hand, large numbers of actors and writers came to large rallies in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago in a demonstration of the immense power of the film and television workforce. Incensed by the unbridled greed and callousness of the entertainment executives and the unfolding destruction of their profession, writers and actors are determined to fight for their jobs and conditions.

On the other hand, what the various union functionaries trotted out to speak at these rallies said (or did not say) on stage points to significant concessions and “compromises” being worked out in secret at the negotiation table.

Writers and actors know that the very future of their profession is on the line. To quote the open letter published by rank-and-file actors that helped make possible their strike in the first place: “What might be considered a good deal in any other year is simply not enough ... with inflation and continued growth in streaming, we need a seismic realignment,” nothing less than a “transformative deal.”

The rally, however, suggests that nothing close to this “seismic realignment” and “transformative deal” is being planned. Neither SAG-AFTRA nor the WGA leadership has any strategy that will advance the interests of their members.

At all the rallies no details of the contract negotiations were discussed, only the most vague and canned union phrases about “solidarity,” “unions,” “union power,” “when we fight back...” These vapid cheerleading slogans, devoid of any content or any

report on what’s actually taking place, are designed to exploit the drive and determination of workers. The officials adopt a cheap “radicalism” while exhausting workers and preparing a sellout.

To the extent that anything substantive was said it was by some of the actors themselves, who well-meaningly voiced the concerns of their co-workers. Ron Perlman, speaking at the rally outside of Disney in Los Angeles, for example, received large applause when he said, “We are living in an age of complete gaslighting, and we are not going to take it any more.”

Were the WGA capable of fighting for an agreement that would benefit its members, it would have nothing to hide and would let the writers know what is taking place. Instead, the most likely scenario is that when a deal is reached, the guild will call a vote as quickly as possible, knowing that writers’ demands have not been met. The WGA can only hope that the writers, exhausted and suffering economically, will accept the claims that the deal is “historic,” the same claim made in 2008, which set the stage for the current predicament the writers face.

The absence of any discussion of the concrete details of the negotiations so far suggests that the WGA leadership, and soon afterward SAG-AFTRA’s, is prepared to reach a ‘compromise’ with the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) that will do nothing to fundamentally address the issues facing actors and writers, in turn, enshrining the destruction of their profession.

The threats to the strike were also reflected in *who* SAG-AFTRA and the WGA invited to speak:

Mike Miller (Los Angeles), vice president IATSE: responsible for the 2021 sellout of IATSE workers. The deal, adjusted for inflation, was a pay cut. It was voted down by more than 50 percent of the membership, but passed due to the undemocratic “electoral” system of IATSE. Miller, meanwhile, made \$343,000 the following year, far more than nearly any IATSE member could dream of making.

Randi Weingarten (New York), president American Federation of Teachers (AFT): she orchestrated the unsafe return to schools during the pandemic over and against the will of millions of teachers, openly siding with “herd immunity” advocates. Weingarten made \$543,562 in 2022.

Lindsay Dougherty (Los Angeles), secretary-treasurer Teamsters Local 399: Dougherty is being promoted as an up-and-coming “reform” labor leader in the Teamsters bureaucracy. The Teamsters leadership has primarily been preoccupied in recent weeks and months with betraying the UPS workers, once again passing off a sellout deal as “historic.”

Any IATSE member listening to Miller preach about “solidarity” on stage would know something rotten was at work. The recent fate of teachers across the country, UPS workers and previously IATSE workers, all speak to the sabotage and betrayals that have been sprung on workers, not victories.

Duncan Crabtree-Ireland the executive director SAG-AFTRA, the most important functionary in the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy, also spoke. He kept on lauding other unions for “refusing to strike break,” yet SAG-AFTRA did that very thing by agreeing to a variety of “interim agreements,” including with Apple, the richest US corporation. The membership had no say on the matter.

Moreover, under Crabtree-Ireland’s leadership, SAG-AFTRA did everything it could to avoid going on strike until pressured by its membership to do so. He made \$989,700 in the last fiscal year (more than \$1,000,000 in total compensation), a staggering amount that places him worlds away from the mass of struggling SAG-AFTRA members.

Actors and writers must be warned: a betrayal is in the works.

The most important thing film and television workers can do is to find sympathizing co-workers and begin forming rank-and-file committees to take democratic control of the struggle away from the union officials. Along with everything else, workers need their own means to communicate information and seriously discuss what is happening and *what needs to happen*.

In **New York**, the WWSWS spoke to several working actors in SAG-AFTRA at the rally at Hudson Yards.

Alphonso Walker Jr. started in theater but has been in television and film for 10 years.

“I work full time, but after taxes,” he told our reporter, “and with what else they take out, I am not able to live on what I make. I got one residuals payment of \$1.61 and another for 33 cents, from a show on a major network. Most SAG-AFTRA members don’t make the \$30,000 to be at the level to get the healthcare plan. By the time I close a TV show I cannot afford things anymore. Half my check goes to taxes, a manager.”

Chris Tames, a theatre and television actor, explained to the WWSWS that “my grandfather told me money runs the world. That is what happens in this country. You should be able to pay the rent and buy goods and be able to take care of yourself. I

think balance in life is an important issue. People are overworked. We need protection of our freedom, so this is not just about wages.”

In **Los Angeles**, the WWSWS spoke to writers, editors and actors at the rally outside Disney Studios.

Matt, a writer who showed off a residual check he received for writing an episode of a major hour-long Netflix show. The check was for 68 cents. Matt commented that “the situation in today’s strike is very different from 2007 [the last WGA strike]. Then, streaming was still small, and our pay was still strong.” Today, in contrast, Matt described workers as being more vulnerable but also more determined to fight.

Anna, a WGA aspirant, said, “I have a lot of friends trying to make it in the film industry, but it’s very hard to get in and make enough wages to afford an apartment and make a life for ourselves.” For every writer in the WGA, there are several more aspirants, like Anna, who work alongside writers as production assistants in the ‘writing room,’ hoping to one day be a staff writer.

“They’re cutting writer jobs, and writing room jobs, I think it’s terrible that they’re cutting them, because that’s how we make our living. We need these jobs throughout the whole production process, and they need to bring those back and stop cutting them.”

An IATSE member, working as an editor, also came to the rally in Los Angeles to support the strike. George, whose name has been changed for purposes of anonymity, said, “This is a movement that goes way beyond one or two unions, it concerns the whole future of our profession.” George explained that he had voted “no” on the 2021 IATSE contract.

“TV writers are not just writers but are producers of the show,” he continued. “Traditionally as the process works, you would have writers working alongside producers in every step of the show. Now, that’s no longer the case.” George explained that writers were more and more being hired in a piece-meal fashion, not present during the actual shooting of productions.

“There’s so much more than typing up a script and then you’re done. They will tweak, they will adjust, they will come to the editors, they are writing new episodes. So this idea that you’re going to shrink them down and have one or two people crank out scripts is insane to me.”



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact