

SAG-AFTRA member: Why striking actors and writers need rank-and-file committees

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The following is an appeal by an actor for the building of rank-and-file committees among actors and writers, on strike now for months. All those who would like to form and build such committees please click on this link.

The time is now.

We are at a crossroads. Workers across the country are rising up against an inhumane, criminal system that is in constant search of new ways to exploit and steal our labor. While the pathologically greedy CEOs are incapable of producing anything on their own, their brilliance is in crafting new methods to extract every last drop from workers – human dignity and climate survival be damned.

As a member of SAG for three decades, I've watched as we have been forced to work more hours for less pay and even fewer benefits. Along with 98 percent of union members, I voted to authorize a strike this past Spring. We cannot continue to work under these conditions, with the ever-growing threat of AI on the horizon to steal even more of our labor.

Unfortunately, there are many instances where we've been told that our demands are unrealistic, not only by the studio bosses, but also by the union bureaucracy which is supposed to represent us. For this reason, it is imperative that we form rank-and-file committees in order to forge a new, powerful path for ourselves, so we aren't reliant on union leaders who keep us workers in the dark, with secret negotiations, deals made without our consent, and agreements imposed on us with no discussion.

A rank-and-file committee would operate democratically and transparently, constantly checked and tested by workers, with honest communication, not only with SAG-AFTRA and WGA members, but with every section of the working class.

As I walk the picket line each day, I'm encouraged to see hundreds of other actors, writers, IATSE members, teachers, nurses, teamsters, SEIU workers – it's a beautiful showing of multi-racial, multi-generational solidarity. Contrary to popular perception, most actors work extremely hard to maintain a life of near-poverty. We often work two to three extra jobs just to continue the privilege of trying to get an acting job or two each year, which won't be enough to live on financially, but will be sufficient to nourish our souls for short periods. In a good year, dozens of auditions may lead to a single job, but often we wade through even more than that to book a role, year after year after year. This translates to being told "no" thousands of times. And that's the kindest rejection. Other times, we're told we're too heavy, too skinny, not sexy enough, too trumpy, too old, have too much plastic surgery...the list of soul-crushing explanations goes

on and on. The rejections sting, but they also fuel our fire. We take it because we have big dreams. As performing artists, we know our history. The best art moves people in ways they didn't know were possible. When the stars align, a movie or a show can galvanize a nation, shed light on atrocities, make us see ourselves and each other with new complexity and understanding. We live to bring audiences to laughter and to tears. On some level, we all want to change the world, even if it's just one person at a time.

The irony for the studio bosses is that they've built a system so cruel and so materially unrewarding for so many that they've created 160,000 actors who are built for a long, painful strike. This is what we do. We slog it out, work long hours, barely scrape by. We're in constant threat of losing our homes, not making enough for health insurance, being told we're imminently replaceable.

We do this all day long. Year in, year out.

And because of this training, we have the fortitude to hold the line. We are determined to shut it all down in order to get what we deserve.

Which is why it was particularly galling to be informed of the Interim Agreements at the beginning of the strike. I've heard all the rationalizations for why these are "good actually," but the point of a strike is to bring the industry to a halt. Withhold our labor. Inflict maximum financial pain. The moment there are cracks in the solidarity of the workers, we show how unserious we are. We give the bosses a glimmer of hope.

Beyond revealing weak negotiating tactics by the union bureaucracy, these agreements were not approved by rank-and-file members. They were presented as a done deal with no democratic input. And if you take the time to talk to actors on the strike line, you will know that we are overwhelmingly not happy about this concession.

In addition to the Interim Agreements, there are other deal points we've been told about which were also arrived at without discussion or approval of union members. At the beginning of COVID, SAG ensured some of the best on-set protections of any industry in the country. Daily testing, vaccinations, and masking were all used to ensure our safety at work. But even as COVID surges in wave after wave, the protections that our "leaders" fought to remove have remained defunct, putting all of us in jeopardy.

We need a rank-and-file committee to decide on our demands democratically, with oversight of the negotiation process, insisting on full accountability. When it comes to residuals, cost-of-living adjustments, protection from AI, or working conditions, we all

should have a say in how we want our workplace to be run. To this end, it is crucial that the studios' accounting books are transparent, so actors and writers see exactly how much profit our labor has produced. This is what we need, and what we must insist upon, regardless of how many people chide us for our "unrealistic" demands.

A union in which 87% of its members don't qualify for healthcare because they earn less than \$26k a year is clearly not up to the task of protecting its 160,000 members from the cruelty of international conglomerates who would sell their own children to make an extra buck.

The studio heads can prattle on about what's "realistic" as they write poems to their yachts and destroy one company after another, but in the end, they can't make art without us. They need us. Right now they're under the illusion that they can steal the fruits of our labor to create more content, but even they understand that the starting point of all AI projects is the art we've already created. There will be no new ideas, no sparks of genius, no true art. Just another re-hash of another sequel of more IP, which will be dictated by the marketing department's movie poster and the tie-in merchandise they think they can sell.

In many regards, this is how Hollywood already functions. The few gems that are released and do fantastically well are always dismissed as anomalies, while the billion-dollar franchises get all the love from the studio moguls. The bottom line is the only line they see.

In this way, Hollywood is no different from every other industry. The people at the top cut corners at every level, exploiting their employees, forcing them into inhumane conditions, while stealing their labor and bragging about it to shareholders. This is the world they discuss as being "realistic", where their workers are forced to see owning a home as a luxury, attending college as a lifelong burden of debt, and receiving life-saving medical treatments as a path to bankruptcy.

Every "successful" corporation in the US and around the world has developed this barbaric system of looting their workers for maximum profit. They have an enormous amount of class solidarity as they vacation together in the Hamptons and pool their obscene wealth to buy politicians and entire governments, ensuring a world where they do away with regulations and escape any consequences for their criminal behavior.

Workers in the US have an estimated \$50 billion stolen from them every year, according to the Economic Policy Institute, surpassing all robberies, burglaries, and motor vehicle thefts combined. The majority of these stolen wages are never recovered by workers.

These are the conditions we're all facing, no matter our line of work. The 1 percent have all the money and the ears of the most powerful people in the world. But we have something they don't: we have the labor they need to steal to survive. And we have sheer numbers on our side.

This is why it's vital that we form rank-and-file committees within each industry, and that we join forces amongst all sectors of the working class, both in the US and internationally. We can't put all our faith in the union bureaucracy to take on the titans of industry, whose sole mission is to destroy us and with whom union

leaders are already way too cozy.

A SAG-AFTRA rank-and-file committee would fight to broaden the strike, including IATSE, the Teamsters, and every section of the entertainment industry. We would reach out directly to hotel workers, teachers, nurses, dock workers, and to every section of workers in struggle, bypassing the union bureaucracy, which prefers to keep us separated and contained.

We've just recently seen the UPS deal that was immediately lauded as "historic" by every faction of the corporate media, with little scrutiny given to the fine print, and even less attention given to the rank-and-file workers who decry the process that left them out in the cold, and now feel forced to vote for a contract that is wildly insufficient. The compromise on wages keeps workers below the salaries they made years ago, and the "historic" deal maintains a two-tier system for part-timers, who will have to supplement their pay with extra jobs. This is an enormous betrayal of a union that voted 97 percent to authorize a strike. 340,000 workers withholding their labor would have cost the US economy (aka CEOs & stockholders) billions of dollars, giving workers huge leverage over the bosses who mistreat them and steal their labor. The power should always be in the hands of the workers who generate the profits. And yet, we see how this story is playing out.

We cannot allow the SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes, or any of the myriad strikes that are spreading throughout our nation, to continue to be either banned by the President and Congress as with the railroad workers, or abruptly averted by agreements that are celebrated before workers even have a chance to read them, as with UPS.

The only way to fight against these international conglomerates who own every aspect of our world is to form rank-and file committees, mobilizing workers from every sector of industry and making our demands known. Now is not the time for concessions that will only bring about our own demise. We must band together and bring these pathologically greedy CEOs to their knees.

This is class war. We need to start acting like it.



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