

Thousands of writers and actors rally in Los Angeles: ‘Most revolutions occur ... when you have nothing left’

Gabriel Black, Our reporters
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Over 3,000 actors, writers and supporters rallied in Los Angeles September 13 in a show of strength against the entertainment companies. Tens of thousands of actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), have been on strike now for two months. Some 11,000 members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) have been on strike for more than four months.

The large turnout of actors and other workers Wednesday was a testament to the strikers’ enormous determination. There is a deeply felt sense that things cannot carry on in the old way. While Disney, Netflix, Amazon and the other giant entertainment corporations earn billions in profit, actors and writers have seen their wages and conditions deteriorate. The WGA estimates that writers’ incomes have dropped by 23 percent over the past decade, taking inflation into account. The companies are relentlessly pushing ahead with different means, through technology and otherwise, of lowering costs at the expense of the workforce. The future of the writing and acting professions is quite literally on the line.

The determination, however, of the striking workers stands in contrast to the dead-end strategy of the union functionaries in the leadership of SAG-AFTRA and the WGA.

Workers must be warned: no “historic” deal is on its way, behind the empty sloganeering of the union tops, the actual development of events points in a different direction, toward a sellout.

Wednesday’s rally was dominated by the usual chants and loud music. This type of carnival-like atmosphere, presented as a climate of “powerful action” and “solidarity,” actually works to suppress serious discussion and analysis, both of the immediate progress of the strike and its larger political and social implications.

To the extent that union leaders presented a strategy it was focused on the question of “how to change the minds of the AMPTP [the employers, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers],” representing the various billion-dollar companies.

Danielle Sanchez-Witzel, a member of the WGA bargaining

team, asserted in her comments that “more important than us feeling our power is the AMPTP feeling it. They see us, they hear us, let them hear us right now.”

Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, the National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator of SAG-AFTRA, presented the strike as the product of the irrationality of the studios, who, he argued, were out of touch with their shareholders.

Crabtree-Ireland claimed the strike was “not about money” and that the studios “have the ability to quickly end it.” The SAG-AFTRA leader told the crowd that he had just met with shareholders of the major entertainment companies. “This is costing them, they’re hurting, and their shareholders aren’t having it, which I can promise you, because I just talked to a whole bunch of them yesterday at a conference they were having down at Long Beach.”

Actor Jon Cryer, in his remarks, claimed that “we’re actually united with the corporations a little bit... we want you to be profitable, we love that... but we want you to channel some of those profits to us.”

If these views prevail, the strike will be betrayed and defeated. They express the illusions and wishful thinking of an affluent, complacent layer in the entertainment industry who have far more in common with management than with struggling writers and actors.

The giant massive entertainment and technology corporations that striking workers are up against are not collaborators or partners. They are the ruthless enemies of the writers, actors, crew members and everyone else who works for a wage. The conglomerates have made clear their intent is to “break” the strikers, starve them into surrender. The union leaders, in so far as they lull the strikers to sleep, are acting as agents of the entertainment firms.

Wall Street has swallowed the already money-mad entertainment industry whole. Enormous financial interests now dominate the major studios. The leading shareholders dictate marching orders to the AMPTP.

To suggest, as Crabtree-Ireland does, that the shareholders of these predatory corporations are actually on the actors’ and writers’ side—that they wish the AMPTP to accede to the

strikers' demands—and that given enough pressure, the AMPTP will come to its senses, is ludicrous and dangerous. It expresses the dead-end of class collaboration and pro-capitalist trade unionism.

Meanwhile, Crabtree-Ireland collects more than \$1 million in total annual compensation from SAG-AFTRA dues money.

Workers the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to at the rally had a different conception of the battle they were waging.

Sean, an actor for several decades, described the sentiment of the AMPTP and the entertainment companies, that the strike should go on until people lose their homes, as "completely f---ing evil. Utterly evil." He continued:

Look, I'm no movie star, but I have rights. I'm a working actor. And the fact is they literally want to kill the possibility of being a working actor.

Sean explained that the previous generation could make a living off of residuals, but today, "streaming is killing the actor's ability to at least keep their head above water between gigs."

He noted the threat of AI, and shared the fact that Central Casting, the lead "background actor" company, has now begun to seriously look into using AI to replace the tens of thousands of actors who work as background actors, also known as "extras."

Sean continued:

If we as a union, and WGA as a union, caves in now, no one besides the top community, the movie stars, will make their money. Everyone else is going to be waiting tables. Even when the residuals are good, most of the actors are waiting tables because only single digits, maybe 10 percent of the union work consistently. But they want to kill this even more. So, this is literally a life-and-death struggle for working actors.

Catherine, a writer and WGA member, put the strike in the broader context of the class struggle against the financial elite.

Catherine stated:

People are standing up because we all realize that if we don't stand up there's no future for all of us. The disparity between rich and poor is massive. Most revolutions around the world or in history occur when people have run out of stuff to protect, when you have nothing left. A lot of industries are facing that, where workers are looking down the line, they're looking 10

years ahead, they're looking 15 years ahead, and they can't do the math on how they're going to retire, or how they're going to make their kids have a better life, and go off to college or whatever they do. It really does feel like everyone can see that this is the moment to seize, to be brave—let's be brave together.

While actors and writers were quick to share their account of the destruction of their industry, many had faith that the sheer determination of workers would prevent a sellout.

Sean, for example, said that a contract which "put lipstick on a pig" was "definitely a concern," noting "SAG-AFTRA has done that in the past."

Writers and actors are suffering economically. *Variety* reported this week that "entertainment workers have moved to take more than \$44 million out of their individual retirement accounts as they endure months without work."

The isolation of the writers and actors strike remains the greatest danger. Despite their rhetoric, the union leaders are desperately looking for a way to shut down the strike. So far AMPTP has not even offered the crumbs they are looking for.

Workers need a fighting strategy to defeat the AMPTP. The AMPTP is not just as SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher describes them, "highly greedy, self-absorbed executives." However greedy and self-absorbed these people may be, at the end of the day they represent massive global financial powers whose interests are directly and irreconcilably opposed to film and television workers.

Everywhere workers are headed into struggle. Some 170,000 North American autoworkers, whose contracts are expiring imminently, have voted massively for strike action. Nurses, Blue Cross workers and others are already on strike.

No section of the film and television workforce can be allowed to fight alone. The entertainment industry needs to be shut down completely, including the productions permitted by the unions. Rank-and-file committees need to be built to organize a mass mobilization of workers in defense of the writers and actors. Their fight is the fight of every worker.



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