

Actors strike in great danger: Oppose a sellout!

David Walsh
6 October 2023

The nearly three-month strike by 65,000 actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (SAG-AFTRA), is in great danger. With the tentative agreement reached between the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and the leadership of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), and an ongoing strike vote by the writers, the companies' plan is to wrap up the actors' strike as quickly as possible.

Negotiations began this week, and as in the case of the WGA, the CEOs of some of the major companies participated personally. *Deadline* explained that in attendance Wednesday "at SAG-AFTRA's Wilshire headquarters was the CEO Gang of Four—NBCUniversal's Donna Langley, Warner Bros Discovery's David Zaslav, Netflix's Ted Sarandos and Disney's Bob Iger—as well as Lombardini, SAG-AFTRA National Executive Director, and Chief Negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland and SAG-AFTRA's longtime Chief Contracts Officer Ray Rodriguez."

The presence of these multi-millionaire thugs is intended to intimidate SAG-AFTRA officials and accelerate the process of getting the industry back to work on the conglomerates' terms. Nothing good for the actors will come out of these behind-closed-doors talks. Actors should immediately demand that they know the contents of these negotiations.

Despite all the media and union hoopla, the WGA tentative agreement, arrived at in similar conditions, will do nothing to stop the attack on writers' jobs and incomes. The wage increases are below the rate of inflation and the deal provides no protections against Artificial Intelligence (AI), relying on the "good will" of the companies. The residuals "bonus" scheme is an insult to the writers, a diversion that only serves to create illusions. The writers will find themselves in an even worse position by 2026. Actors have to repudiate the notion of this rotten contract as a "model" for any agreement.

The companies, driven by Wall Street, are determined to lower costs and reduce many writers and actors to "gig"

workers. By covering up the economic realities, that consolidation and major job losses loom, the WGA leadership has left the writers vulnerable to the predations of the giant firms. Decent conditions and lives for film artists and the capitalist structure of the entertainment industry are incompatible. This has to be the starting point for any struggle against Disney, Netflix, Amazon, Warner Bros. Discovery and the rest. These companies are not "partners," but the bitter enemies of writers, actors and crew members.

The SAG-AFTRA leadership, despite a 97.9 percent strike vote by the rank and file, did all it could to avoid a strike. In late June, as the strike deadline approached, union President Fran Drescher and national executive director and chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland sent out a video to the SAG-AFTRA membership boasting about how well the "extremely productive" talks with management were going. Drescher added, "We're standing strong, and we're going to achieve a seminal deal."

This prompted an open letter, eventually signed by more than 1,000 actors, warning the union leadership not to sell the actors out.

The letter put the union leaders on notice. It referred to Artificial Intelligence "as a threat to our livelihoods that must be addressed right now" and added pointedly, "We felt as though you understood how wildly our pay and our residuals have been undermined, how long we're being held between seasons."

The protest letter explained that the entertainment industry had reached "an unprecedented inflection point" and "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." It explicitly addressed itself to the problems of "working class actors." Provocatively, the SAG-AFTRA leadership still delayed calling a strike for two weeks.

None of what the actors' open letter called for—a "seismic realignment," a "transformative deal"—was achieved in the WGA tentative agreement. The guild leadership was never

concerned with winning genuine gains for the writers. If it had been, it would have pursued an entirely different, opposed strategy. It would have fought for the shutting down of the industry, appealed to the ranks of the Teamsters and IATSE over the heads of the bureaucrats-policemen of those unions, demanded the opening of the books, a 25 percent basic raise and serious residual payments and made the writers' cause the cause of the whole working class.

Instead the WGA has obediently accepted the isolation of the strike, accommodating itself to the treachery of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, allied to the Biden administration. The White House wants "labor peace," above all, as it pursues its reactionary policy of fraudulent "national unity" as part of its war drive against Russia and China.

The SAG-AFTRA leadership is proceeding along the same lines. It has already demonstrated its willingness to accede to the companies. It cannot be trusted for one instant. The SAG-AFTRA officialdom is committed to returning the industry to "normal," so the conglomerates can pursue their profit interests.

"This is senior people sitting down together and the deliberations are going well," an "industry insider" told *Deadline* about Wednesday's negotiations. "Everyone is conducting themselves calmly." This is a recipe for betrayal.

Actors have been starved of residual payments, same as writers. One of the most memorable features of the strike has been the public display of checks for pennies paid out to performers in successful shows on streaming platforms. On artificial intelligence, actors are even more threatened than the writers, and the process is already well under way. How are these attacks to be stopped? Very big, "existential" questions are at stake, the professional lives and futures of thousands of people.

Actors and writers have walked picket lines for months, making great sacrifices. The well-paid union officials in both the WGA and SAG-AFTRA are 10 times closer to management, in income, social position and outlook, than they are to the strikers. They are incapable of leading a successful struggle.

It took a semi-revolt by actors for the strike to occur in the first place. It will take another revolt, more conscious, widespread and better organized, to prevent a betrayal now. The situation demands the building of rank-and-file organizations, democratically controlled, led by actors dedicated to the needs and interests of the working class, not the profits and market share of the giant firms. The actors need to fight for the end of the isolation of their struggle, reaching out to healthcare workers, teachers, autoworkers and others. Beyond that, the corporate stranglehold of film and television production has to be addressed head-on through the emergence of a consciously socialist section of

writers and actors. The profit system is leading to the devastation of economic and artistic conditions for film workers.

In August, a SAG-AFTRA member posted an important piece on the WWSWS, calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees, which argued:

"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. ...

"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. ...

"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."

All those in agreement should get in touch with the WWSWS.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact