

SAG-AFTRA resumes talks with conglomerates amid mounting rank-and-file anger, international tensions and efforts at censorship

Marc Wells
25 October 2023

The determined strike by 65,000 actors members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) is now in its fourth month. It is in great danger in the context of a sellout agreement covering 11,000 writers, organized by the Writers Guild of America (WGA) leadership last month after a five-month strike.

Meanwhile, world developments are intensifying all social and class conflicts, producing efforts to suppress political opposition to Israeli genocide in the film and television industry.

Last Saturday, SAG-AFTRA's negotiating committee notified members that on the 100th day of the strike "the company executives have asked us to return to the table. Official negotiations will resume on Tuesday, October 24." On October 12, the union leadership announced with "profound disappointment" that the negotiations "hit a snag." The SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy has been facing the conundrum of how to control the rank-and-file's mounting anger over declining living standards and issues like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and streaming residuals. On both issues, despite a great deal of hot air from WGA officials, writers got essentially nothing.

According to its own public statements, the AMPTP has intended to drag out the actors' strike until the latter were exhausted and suffering financially. "Not Halloween precisely, but late October, for sure, is the intention," a top-tier producer close to AMPTP President Carol Lombardini told *Deadline* back in July, that is, even before SAG-AFTRA members went on strike. This was also the time when a studio executive told *Deadline*, "The endgame is to allow things to drag on until union members start losing their apartments and losing their houses," a comment that ignited massive anger among writers and actors.

No trust can be placed in the SAG-AFTRA negotiating team. At the end of June, president Fran Drescher and chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland announced that a deal would likely be reached with the AMPTP within days—that is, before the contract expiration, in order to avert a strike—and that details could not be shared with membership. An open letter by more than a thousand actors forcefully opposed and upset the union's plans.

Throughout the summer, the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy organized stunt rallies with other union officials, bragging about solidarity, when in fact it accepted the isolation of the strike imposed by the AFL-CIO and refused to turn striking actors toward the dockworkers, UPS workers, healthcare workers and hotel workers. Those workers were either striking in isolation as well or their respective unions were working desperately to prevent any action, as in the case of UPS/Teamsters.

Workers have no choice but to take matters in their own hands to ensure that their needs are addressed. The vehicle for this is not a compromised, affluent union bureaucracy, but the creation of rank-and-file committees run democratically and independently by workers alone.

Currently, a major confrontation is taking place between the political and corporate establishment, on the one hand, supporting the state of Israel in its genocidal attack on the population in Gaza and, on the other, an ever-growing opposition to the criminal war policies of US imperialism, which is lending its unconditional support to the Israeli government of fascist prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the tune of tens of billions of dollars.

The atmosphere has become so toxic and repressive that hundreds of WGA, Directors Guild of America (DGA) and SAG-AFTRA members have signed a statement in opposition to "the recent pressure campaigns by certain high-profile members of our guilds to issue statements in support of Israel amidst its ongoing siege of Gaza." The writers, directors and actors signed with initials only, in fear of retaliation from the establishment.

The statement points to the degree of censorship and blacklisting that reigns in Hollywood, reminiscent of the McCarthy era, when left-wing Hollywood artists were in the crosshairs of political persecution. The signatories assert that "many of us who stand against genocide cannot even take that bare minimum position publicly without fear of being doxxed or blacklisted." The statement goes on to point out that the "language others have chosen has cost lives, both here in the U.S., and overseas. Just recently, we tragically witnessed the murder of a six-year-old Wadea Al-Fayoume, a Palestinian boy in Chicago, a horrifying event that cannot be disconnected from the broader narrative and

its consequences.”

The case of Creative Artists Agency agent Maha Dakhil is quite telling. Dakhil was forced to resign from her post on the internal board of CAA for expressing the view that Israel is engaging in genocide against the Palestinians.

Views that cut across the official narrative, which justifies and sponsors the ongoing Israeli mass murder and other crimes, must be suppressed at all costs, by the destruction of careers, the gagging of talented artists and the curtailing of artistic and cultural freedom.

It is not surprising that the mood on the actors’ picket lines is affected by these developments, including a heavy presence of union bureaucrats who intervened to deliberately disrupt the interviews this writer was conducting.

The WWSWS was at the Warner Bros. picket line on Tuesday. War is a major concern for artists, as actor/writer Danny commented: “As a Lebanese, from my dad’s side, I lived in Lebanon during the civil war. We spent nights in shelters, sometimes in the corridors. I’ve lived the wars and I know how ugly and brutal they are. I have seen people die in front of me. The only ones losing are the people who are dying, innocent kids and people who are dying on both sides.”

“I have a lot of Jewish friends that I love dearly,” he went on, “and I have a lot of Palestinian friends that I love dearly, and at the end of the day we’re all human. And this is about humanity. It’s not about religion. If the world will not stand and say something about the saving of humanity, then we’ve lost it all.”

Asked about the pressure from the establishment, he “felt it at some points.” He also reported that “two years ago I lost my only sibling, not to war, but to COVID, which I think is another piece of the war.”

Danny referred to the comments made by the executive months ago to delay negotiations until writers lost their homes: “What about us actors who have a family? I have a family. I have a 10-year-old boy to support and a wife. Thank God she’s working. I want to go back to work, get fair pay and be respected.”

Elaborating on the economics: “I’m sick and tired of the pennies in residual checks that I’m getting. I don’t care if we go another hundred days, as hungry as we are to get back to work. I don’t think we should settle and nobody should settle in life.”

Eddie, an actor, emphasized the global character of the struggle: “You look at all the labor disputes around the world, there’s a situation going on globally where people are saying that the profits are not trickling down, or trickling down is never enough for everybody by the time it gets to the bottom. It’s just the pattern of what goes on. They don’t want to pay the workers, the people that are bringing the money in. It just shows something about our society.”

Commenting on the ultra-rich, he continued: “The only thing better than four billion is five billion! Power concedes nothing without a demand. So, as long as they have the power, people need to come together and try to do the right thing to get the right result.”

On the question of funds allocated for endless wars, Eddie said: “Governments find money for what they need to find money for.” But for working people, “we need the basics and if you don’t get

those things, then there’s going to be an issue. Crime is connected to poverty. When people don’t have, they will do what they think they need, take advantage of certain situations.”

Lastly, Eddie reflected on a collective solution: “One person isn’t going to storm the castle and take over. It takes a lot of people with one idea, trying to do right things that are good for the masses of people. That’s what we need, to educate ourselves.”

Ben, a novelist and comic book writer, also picketed in support of actors. “The larger fight that’s going on now is the fight for the creation of culture and art being a viable career and not being exclusively something that the wealthy and independently funded can do. My background is in film production. I was a development exec for 10, 15 years. Just to get into the film industry required so much unpaid work, so much time spent not making money, that only people who come with the ability to fund themselves can make it past that entrance.”

Ben also commented on the decline of artistic and cultural value in corporate entertainment production: “As studios are bought by investment companies and tech firms just looking to make profit immediately, there is less and less focus on making good art that has a point of view, that drives culture forward, and there’s more focus on just how can they make the most money now, with no regard for the quality of the product they’re creating.”

Asked about the pressure on artistic freedom from the establishment, especially as it pertains to the genocide in Gaza, Ben replied that “there are people far smarter and far more well-informed than me who can speak to the specifics of what’s going on in the Middle East right now. As for the larger idea of artistic freedom, obviously I would say that artists should be free to express what they want and that art requires that liberty.”



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact