

Thousands of striking US actors in new open letter once again warn union officials: Don't sell us out!

Dan Conway, David Walsh
30 October 2023

Thousands of actors, including very prominent figures, have signed an open letter calling on the leadership of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) not to give in to the entertainment giants.

"We would rather stay on strike than take a bad deal," the letter insists. Signatories include Sarah Paulson, Chelsea Handler, Christian Slater, Sandra Oh, Daveed Diggs, Pedro Pascal and Kal Penn. Among the others who signed: Carrie Ann Moss, Mark Ruffalo, Amy Ryan, Simon Pegg, Rosanna Arquette, Allison Janney, Helen Hunt, Marisa Tomei, Jon Hamm, Lesley Ann Warren, Richard Schiff, Susan Sarandon, Billy Crudup, Frances Fisher, Timothy Olyphant, Rebecca Demornay, Edie Falco and many, many more.

The open letter, addressed to the SAG-AFTRA Negotiating Committee, recalls that "Back in June, before we went on strike, a large group of members signed an open letter telling our leaders that we would rather go on strike than take a bad deal. Now, more than 100 days into our strike, that is still true."

The letter says quite firmly, "We have not come all this way to cave now. We have not gone without work, without pay, and walked picket lines for months just to give up on everything we've been fighting for. We cannot and will not accept a contract that fails to address the vital and existential problems that we all need fixed."

It goes on, "In any union, there will always be a minority who are not willing to make temporary sacrifices for the greater good. But we, the majority who voted overwhelmingly to authorize this strike, are still standing in solidarity, ready to strike as long as it takes and to endure whatever we must in order to win a deal that is worthy of our collective sacrifice."

It refers pointedly to "every minimum payment, health and pension benefit, residual, royalty, and workplace protection," all of which the SAG-AFTRA leadership is clearly prepared to give up on.

As in June, the powerful message from the rank-and-file actors is clear: don't sell us out!

Meanwhile, SAG-AGTRA leaders delivered its response late last week to the counter-offer by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). Negotiations continued on Sunday with both sides eager to reach an agreement by early November, if not sooner. Otherwise, news reports suggest, negotiations will likely not continue again until January at the earliest.

"Things are feeling more optimistic," one studio employee with inside knowledge of the sessions told the *Wrap* on Saturday. The two sides have recently been meeting on an almost daily basis. The studios declared October 11 that the "gap between the AMPTP and SAG-AFTRA is too great, and conversations are no longer moving us in a productive direction," but talks soon began again, after the companies' action sufficiently intimidated union officials.

While SAG-AFTRA is holding meetings with the AMPTP behind closed doors and behind the backs of the membership, the few details released to the press thus far reveal a sell-out in the works. The "gap" declared by the studios will be closed at the expense of struggling actors if the two sides get their way.

While the overall financial impact of the strike is difficult to calculate, the average projection is \$150 million per week. Nonetheless, the studios, with the full support of the Biden administration, are determined to beat back workers' demands in order to maintain their astronomic profits in the long term through poverty wages for the vast majority of actors and entertainment workers.

Laying out this strategy, one studio executive interviewed by *Deadline* in July explained, "The endgame is to allow things to drag on until union members start losing their apartments and losing their houses."

On Thursday, industry media revealed that SAG-AFTRA has reduced its demand for increases in first-year minimum rates from 11 percent down to 9 percent, bringing the union

closer to the AMPTP's position of 7 percent. A fraction of SAG-AFTRA membership makes a living in the acting profession.

The union has repeatedly lowered its initially extremely "modest" proposal for two percent of revenue, first to one percent, and then even further, to \$1 each year per streaming platform subscriber, and most recently to 54 cents per subscriber.

Even this miserable amount is likely a non-starter for the streaming giants, who've characterized it, along with viewing bonuses to actors for particularly popular shows, as a "levy" on customers. From their point of view, revenues are entirely the property of the financial parasites who run the streaming giants, while actors and workers who actually produce content are to receive nothing.

The ongoing strike and vocal opposition among actors and others to the Biden administration's support for Israeli genocide are both developments of immense concern for the White House. Washington depends heavily on the entertainment industry to condition public opinion and create conditions within the industry whereby serious works of art challenging the official status quo have little to no chance of emerging.

Moreover, it seeks to head off any unity with actors and other sections of the working class in struggle, such as CVS and Walgreens pharmacists and hotel workers on the West Coast, or the growing sections of rank and file autoworkers who wish to take the autoworkers' struggle out of the hands of the rotten UAW bureaucracy. The growing multi-millioned protests against the Israeli assaults are also having a significant influence on the actors' struggle, an influence that needs to be broadened and deepened.

Actors and entertainment workers will only be able to have their demands met through unity with other sections of the working class in struggle, both throughout the United States and internationally. This united struggle, however, can only be realized through the formation of rank and file committees independent of the trade union apparatus, which is committed to the profit interests of the ruling elite.

Such a perspective is gaining a hearing among broader layers of entertainment workers and must be expanded and fought for, as one Hollywood worker recently expressed.

Another actor, who wished to remain anonymous, recently commented to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the need for entertainment workers to unite in struggle with workers internationally. The actor wrote that, "it's more important than ever for us all to commit to solidarity with the working class across all industries, in this country and throughout the world. Our power, and our only hope, is in our solidarity and our fierce commitment to lifting up the working class wherever they may be."

The actor related that the SAG-AFTRA leadership is telling members that they are not allowed to speak up against the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people. "It's becoming increasingly frustrating that at the same time we're being told we must trust leadership and not criticize any strategy or decisions, we're getting pressure not to speak up about the ongoing genocide of Palestinians. Union leaders work for us. They should not misunderstand their position. They're not our bosses. They're supposed to represent us, not hand down dictates.

"Most actors are barely scraping by. Eighty-seven percent of rank-and-file members don't even qualify for healthcare coverage, which only kicks in after earning \$26,470 in a single year. We typically work several different non-acting jobs while attempting to keep our schedules flexible enough to go on auditions, take classes, get new headshots, and deal with all the peripheral commitments that are required as we carve out our careers.

"Many of us have voiced concerns over how the secret negotiations are playing out, with the most notable example being the interim agreements," the actor wrote. "These agreements were not crafted with the democratic approval of rank-and-file union members. We were informed of their existence as a fait accompli at the beginning of the strike. Anyone who had the temerity to express concern or criticism was promptly chastised with familiar refrains of 'now is not the time,' 'we need a unified voice,' and 'we need to trust that our union leaders know what's best.'

"When I hear union bureaucracy talk about their 'partners' at the AMPTP, I can't help but be reminded of Democratic Party leadership who constantly talk about needing a strong Republican Party, and how they want to compromise with their 'friends across the aisle,' while at the same time, they show utter contempt for their bases, and use their tremendous power to crush working class movements on the left."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact