

“The world is getting tired of workers being exploited!”

SAG-AFTRA members and supporters call for workers’ unity and an end to war

Marc Wells
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In recent days, the corporate media has breathlessly been reporting that an end to the strike, nearly four months old, by 65,000 actor members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) might be imminent. In fact, superficially “optimistic” and superficially “pessimistic” accounts follow one another.

Striking actors, the ones whose lives and careers are at issue, have no voice in the process whatsoever. The talks are taking place behind closed doors, above all, behind the backs of rank-and-file actors.

Last Monday the union negotiating committee announced that while “talks over the past week have been productive, we remain far apart on key issues.”

The following day, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) presented its Artificial Intelligence (AI) counter-proposal. On Wednesday, SAG-AFTRA’s negotiating committee met to discuss the companies’ proposal. The negotiating committee is still waiting to hear back on the full counter-proposal package the union presented last Saturday. The two parties are going to great lengths to organize a deal. SAG-AFTRA has the task of presenting something it can “sell” to an angry, restive membership.

Last week, thousands of actors voiced their concern about the trajectory of the struggle in the form of an open letter, the second one of this type (the first one, written in late June, triggered the beginning of the actors’ strike), addressed to the union leadership, warning it not to betray them. The sellout agreement covering 11,000 writers, organized by the Writers Guild of America (WGA) in October after a five-month strike, is correctly being interpreted as the opening shot to a wider stab in the back, especially on the question of AI and streaming royalties, defined as “existential issues” by actors.

There are many reasons not to have the slightest confidence in the SAG-AFTRA leadership. First, it tried to reach a rotten deal in June, an action undermined by the first open letter. The actors union has fully accepted the isolation of the strike imposed by the AFL-CIO, Teamsters and IATSE bureaucracy, who are terrified of an industry-wide strike. The possibility of uniting the efforts of actors and writers and UPS, healthcare, hotel, education and dock workers clearly existed. Nothing could have been further from the minds of the union officials.

SAG-AFTRA organized phallys “solidarity” union leaders who were working overtime to prevent a broader strike, which would have placed workers in an immensely powerful position.

Now, members receive daily “updates” telling them precisely nothing and confirming the anti-democratic, secretive nature of the behind-closed-doors talks. To base a five-month struggle on blind trust instead of active democratic participation by the rank and file would be a fatal mistake: There is no reason whatsoever why every member should not follow the negotiations online or in person. The future of an entire generation of artists is being decided behind the scenes with no right to intervene in the process.

The actors strike continues now in the shadow of enormous and tragic world events. The Israeli mass murder in Gaza is a question that cannot be ignored. SAG-AFTRA, like the other unions, is being pressured, with no resistance from the leadership, into lining up with the Israeli war crimes.

SAG-AFTRA’s disgraceful official statement took a pro-Zionist position. The union “deplores and condemns the horrific acts of aggression against the Israeli people on October 7,” remaining shamefully silent on Israel’s criminal onslaught on Gaza residents. Nearly 10,000 are dead, and thousands more face death. Organizations that associate themselves with such crimes can only play a reactionary role on every question.

In response, hundreds of WGA, DGA and SAG-AFTRA members felt compelled to anonymously sign 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.”

There is no shortage of determination and opposition to war on the picket lines. The WWSW interviewed several striking actors Thursday at the Culver Studios, headquarters to Amazon in Los Angeles. While chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, who makes more than \$1 million a year from members’ dues, was offering himself for photo ops, actors and supporters articulated their deep concerns over the future of the industry and international events.

Jerry, an actor, expressed his determination. “We know people are hurting and haven’t had work for a long time, but we’re willing to fight as long as it takes to get what is fair. In terms of AI, our main concern is that we don’t want our likeness being

used without our permission or compensation. In terms of residuals, we want something that's comparable to what we've had in the past from network and cable services. We want some revenue sharing from the money these companies are making."

Asked about declining living standards and increased inequality, he said: "It's very clear if you just look at the gap between the workers and the CEOs 10 years ago versus what it is now. It's exponentially increasing, and I think workers in general are getting tired of it, and that's why we're seeing this kind of striking action throughout the country, really throughout the world." Speaking to the question of class solidarity, he suggested that it takes "all the workers banding together to try to make change."

An actress who requested to remain anonymous stated her opposition to the genocide in Gaza. "This country loves to police other countries and infiltrate and push its ideology, and it loves to support war. So, whenever there is a war, the US is ready to get involved. Whenever there are resources at stake, especially in Gaza and the Middle East, the US is all in. We as working people have to all come together globally, not just actors, and fight for each other because we cannot depend on corporations and government institutions to do so."

She explained her thoughts about President Joe Biden supporting Israel's killing of Gazan women and children. "It's on brand for a US president. It doesn't matter Democrat or Republican. When it comes to Israel, the US has always supported its actions. The genocide needs to stop."

SAG-AFTRA has not made one sympathetic comment about Palestinian victims. The actress emphasized, "I think the union should be firm that we don't want to kill people. Many people in Gaza are children. And over 7,000 people have been killed. It's very clear. No! Stop it!"

Greg, a retired highway maintenance worker for 17 years, has been picketing with the writers and actors for months. "I've been supporting the strike in two cities, LA and New York. I'm a member of the audience, and I'm one of the many fans that who knows that when your money comes off of your card, it goes right into the pockets of these studios. For the studios to treat these actors and for that matter writers this way is disgusting."

He commented on falling living standards. "Let me give you the whole picture. What I've seen all summer, besides actors and writers being on strike, even UPS came close to having their own strike. The one thing we need to learn from all these people either being on strike or threatening to be on strike is that the world is getting tired of workers being exploited! A lot of employers expect working people to jump to their every move."

Greg elaborated on the horrors of war. "My father's a World War II veteran. War sucks. Young working people that also serve our military and our US Armed Forces can be called overseas any time. This country has launched an attack against its own working class." About kids being deployed in the military, he continued, "They come home, and they're not only coming into a different war but also with the scars of what they saw, which are not being dealt with."

He commented, "We should have working people fighting for other working people, not working people begging the rich for an opportunity!"

Kimberly took up the corporations on AI. "Having studios possessing the ability to scan us and reuse our likeness and our face in perpetuity, that's basically taking away our livelihood. And honestly, that should be illegal." She also expressed concern over the consent clause, which actors would have to agree to as a form of job eligibility. "You're not guaranteed the job, but you also have agreed that they can have your likeness from your scan. So, they have the freedom to not pay you but still use you."

The question of whether workers should control the use of AI came up. "That's what we are fighting for," she commented. "That's why we've been out here for 112 days. They have used our strike to cut departments they no longer wanted to fund and blame it on the strike. They're cutting costs in a lot of different ways, laying people off left and right, cutting the 'fat' of their companies and blaming it on the strike."

Mark, a former director for large public healthcare sector accounts, candidly commented, "I'm a background actor. I already have a pension and Social Security so this is a supplemental income for me, but I don't know how anybody who is really trying to make it as a full-time actor can do it. I would say the majority of the people that I meet must have secondary or maybe tertiary jobs. They have to do so many different things. I think that actors should make a livable wage, especially in an area like Los Angeles, a high-cost area."

He is also at odds with the AI consent clause. "If I want a job really bad, I'll sign anything. I'll sign myself away. I don't want to sign this clause, and I don't want to be discriminated against because I don't." Highlighting the high level of exploitation, he continued: "They're already asking us to pay for our transportation. They ask us to bring our own wardrobe. Then they're asking us to sign away our image. I don't want to be put in some commercial whose product I don't endorse. I don't want to be in a political ad showing my face for a cause I might not want to support. No, I think we lose a lot by doing that."



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