

SAG-AFTRA striker on the fight against sellout deal: “The rank and file are the ones who are going to have to do it”

David Walsh
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The leadership of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) announced Wednesday it had reached a tentative agreement with the the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

The 65,000 actors have been on strike since mid-July against the entertainment giants. Some 11,500 members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) were also on strike from May 2 to September 27.

Using the same anti-democratic methods as the WGA in September, SAG-AFTRA officials, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, imperiously announced that the “strike will end at 12:01 am Thursday. On Friday, the deal will go to the union’s national board on Friday for approval.”

The union announced the agreement after two weeks of behind-closed-doors negotiations with the AMPTP. SAG-AFTRA’s acceptance of the deal “came not long before a deadline of 5 p.m. that the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers had set for the union to give their answer on whether they had a deal.” The companies gave an ultimatum, and SAG-AFTRA leaders kneeled before their corporate overlords.

The talks have been going on, as the following interview makes clear, behind the backs of the SAG-AFTRA membership, who have been left entirely in the dark.

According to news reports, contract talks “stalled” early this week over the insistence of the companies that they should have the permanent right to own and use performers’ digitally scanned likenesses. The two sides have been trying to organize a deal that the union could pass off as a protection of actors from AI. The conglomerates have no intention of giving up their plans to lower costs and eliminate jobs in a drastic manner at the expense of actors, writers and every other category of worker in the industry.

The union leadership and the companies went back and forth, but nothing that comes out of these secret negotiations will benefit rank-and-file actors. SAG-AFTRA has already made numerous major concessions, including over minimum pay, revenue sharing and other issues. Actors need to understand that a serious betrayal is taking place before their eyes. The union officials’ declaration that “the strike is over,” before the membership has had any chance to review the results of the talks, exposes them as agents of the companies and enemies of working class actors.

The strike can only be taken forward by rejecting the SAG-AFTRA-organized deal and taking the struggle out of the hands of the affluent, complacent layers who lead the union through the building of rank-and-file committees. It is not too late for that.

We recently spoke to a veteran SAG-AFTRA member, a striker, who preferred to remain anonymous.

David Walsh: As far as you know, what is the current state of

negotiations between SAG-AFTRA and the employers, the AMPTP?

SAG-AFTRA member: It’s so interesting. We’re being completely left out of what’s happening behind closed doors. The only way we know that there’s possible trouble is when big stars write and issue an open letter. Obviously, they are being updated on the negotiations and where the union leadership is giving in, or threatens to give in. But the rest of us have no indication of what’s happening.

The first open letter telling the union leaders not to sell out was issued in June, before the contract expired. I don’t know that a lot of us understood how close union leaders Fran Drescher and Duncan Crabtree-Ireland were to capitulating until we saw that open letter.

DW: In other words, and it’s not their fault of course, but you’re at the mercy of the benevolence of these prominent figures. The rank and file has to scramble around for crumbs from the table. So you don’t know anything about the talks?

SAG-AFTRA member: Actually, no. Nothing. I don’t know how this will all play out. We will be told it’s a “historic” deal, and everybody is supposed to pat one another on the back and say it was worth it. It’s a one-way street of solidarity.

The strike is a microcosm of the political situation, at least among some of the people I speak to. People who vote for and accept the Democratic Party. “Don’t quibble, don’t criticize, we need unity.” “Now is not the time ...”

But many people, especially younger people, were pretty outraged by the interim agreements, which the union signed, allowing all sorts of productions to continue. When this was brought up, you had some of the same silence, or people saying it was a great thing because some actors got to work. But others, as I say, were angry. These interim agreements were terrible. A strike is a strike.

This is a different kind of strike than an autoworkers’ strike. Many people are not making money acting anyway. When you go on strike, “Oh, well, I’ll go on *not* getting a paycheck.”

There’s such a level of unemployment and economic desperation, we can do this forever. Many of us could strike forever. It doesn’t change our daily reality that much. You’re already having to work at another job or whatever.

Many actors have two or three jobs. Anybody who does well enough to earn enough from acting has already won the lottery. Everybody is hoping for that, that golden egg.

DW: Do you know what’s happened to SAG-AFTRA’s original demands? Revenue sharing, basic minimums, etc.

SAG-AFTRA member: They’ve lowered their demands on all of those issues, I believe. To be honest, I get that from reading the WWS. The union doesn’t tell us anything.

Yes, they’re making concessions, as though that were a reasonable and

sensible thing, like “reaching across the aisle.” But the studios are our enemies. The studio bosses have made it clear that they wish they didn’t have to pay actors at all, that they are going to wait this out and hope that we lose our homes and are so destitute that we will take any deal.

In any case, if they have to pay anything, they will simply raise the cost of the streaming subscriptions and such. They work backwards from their profit needs and their multimillion-dollar salaries and figure it out from there. It’s a zero sum game. They know what they want to walk away with, no matter what. If they have to accept slightly larger writers’ rooms and pay a little more in residuals for really successful shows, and we know they cook the books all the time, they will take it out in other ways.

DW: On the revenue sharing, the union supposedly asked for 2 percent to begin with, then they lowered that to 1 percent, which is already a 50 percent cut. Then they asked a dollar for every subscriber, and now 54 cents. I don’t know how much lower they can go.

SAG-AFTRA member: We’ll probably find out, unfortunately.

We hear this from the WGSW, but we don’t get this from the union. There’s a blackout. A lot of pep talk. That’s the way the union leaders want it. “We’re doing our best, see you on the picket line,” that sort of thing.

DW: As you have pointed out, only a small percentage of SAG-AFTRA members earn a living as actors. Do you believe that any agreement reached under the present circumstances, including the closed-door character of the negotiations, will change that?

SAG-AFTRA member: No, because you know again, that’s sort of the allure of this process and the tragedy. Those gates on the studios are not there to keep people *in*. Most of us always are simply struggling. And will continue to struggle.

DW: Speaking largely, what are your and what are actors’ greatest concerns at this point?

SAG-AFTRA member: I think Artificial Intelligence [AI] is probably the biggest one, which affects everyone, even big stars. Increased minimums and so forth, that doesn’t really wake up the big names the way AI does.

I don’t think there was serious movement on that with the Writers Guild, despite the propaganda, and I think it’s going to be even harder with actors. It’s so easy to alter an appearance. It will be very difficult to prove that they’ve used your image.

DW: So what would the unfettered or partially unfettered use of AI mean for a great many actors?

SAG-AFTRA member: You show up to an audition, and they ask, “Would you be willing to let us do a full-body scan if you get this job?”—and most people will say yes. Because you don’t even know if you’ve gotten the job yet, so why push yourself out of it?

If you say no, they’ll just move on to the next person who needs the \$300 a day. So it’s not really a protection to say to actors, “Hey, you’re allowed to say no.”

In the case of background actors, when they are paid \$300 for a lifetime use of their image, wiping out most of them, that will also take away jobs from second assistant directors, hair and makeup people, less of them will be necessary. It will have a cascading effect.

So many jobs will become unnecessary if the images of thousands of people can just be popped into a film.

It happens already. When they show crowds, trying to push whatever piece of war propaganda it is, if you examine them carefully, they often just copy and paste a group from a crowd over and over and over again.

This is an issue that’s going to motivate people across the lines of success and earnings. The bigger names may be concerned on behalf of others, but I think they’re concerned for themselves too. They see how images can be used, posthumously and in other ways, in things they would not have signed on for. That’s already going on. Prince’s estate or Michael Jackson’s estate will allow things the artist might not have.

There’s an understanding that it will get even worse.

To feel that you’re not an individual with rights and that you can be replaced digitally, for anybody, that is an enormous threat and a source or outrage. Nobody wants to be replaced by a machine image.

DW: What was your reaction to the second open letter?

SAG-AFTRA member: Well, it revealed two things. There is a group of people who are certainly being kept in the loop about the negotiations, and I don’t belong to it. Also that once again, that group—and I’m thankful to them—was alarmed enough by what they were hearing to realize that there were going to be concessions that were a bridge too far.

We have to rely on the good graces of the people who have the power to let us know a bit of what’s going on, because the union leadership does not. The second open letter was specifically about AI, as far as I understand. It was a message: “Do not sell us out now, we can do this strike for as long as it takes. Don’t take a bad deal.”

DW: This speaks to the state of the trade unions and their character. They’re not negotiating for you, they’re negotiating for themselves, for their interests, for that social layer and for Hollywood as a whole, the studios. They are defenders of the status quo, come what may.

They’re trying to come up with some deal that they can sell. They know people are angry, they’ve been out for months, they’re not just going to take anything ...

SAG-AFTRA member: But it sounds as though very recently, they were prepared to make another very bad deal.

DW: Getting a “good deal” would require taking on the entire corporate structure, the Biden administration, and they will never do that.

As you know, in our view, the WGA contract was a sellout, a lot of promises, a lot of words, which will not benefit the vast majority of writers. In fact, they will be worse off. On AI, on residuals, on the basic minimum, they got nothing essentially. No one will even make up for what was lost through inflation. The minimum staffing may help a few people, who were already doing well.

SAG-AFTRA member: But there will be fewer shows.

DW: That was my next question. If, as the *Wall Street Journal* predicts, there will be 30 to 40 percent fewer shows and consequently fewer writers’ jobs ...?

SAG-AFTRA member: As I said, it’s a zero sum game. The studios will decide what their profit margins have to be and work back from there. It will mean fewer shows or fewer episodes, or smaller casts. The fact that older shows were not grandfathered in to getting residuals is already an enormous betrayal. It’s so disgraceful. And the union says, “Well, we were never going to get everything we wanted.”

The younger people, the ones just starting out, are already aware. They’re much more militant. The difference between the picket lines in 2007-08 and picket lines in 2023 is very striking, vast. Much more talk about inequality, the corporations, who the enemy is.

DW: A report from FilmLA was recently published, and it points out that during the second quarter (July to September), the period of the “dual strike,” film and television production only declined by 41 percent. You supposedly have the entire industry shut down, both writers and actors. And yet 60 percent of production continued. What kind of strike is that?

SAG-AFTRA member: It’s horrible? It’s disgusting. It makes me so furious.

DW: One part of that is reality TV. Non-fiction writers weren’t on strike. All of that went on. “Shooting for reality TV shows proved a sustaining force in the third quarter, with 2,166 shoot days. Roughly 97 percent of all TV filming for the period came from reality series, comprising nearly 41 percent of all on-location shooting that occurred in the third quarter.”

SAG-AFTRA member: That’s what happened during the 2007-08 strike. Reality shows, etc., really took off. It’s a giant scab operation, permitted by the union.

DW: And there were the thousands of waivers, the interim agreements, which allowed many productions to continue. It ends up not being so different from the UAW's fraudulent "stand-up strike," where production is not seriously damaged. Almost two-thirds of production continued.

SAG-AFTRA member: When writers go on strike, and actors are going to a movie set with one of these interim agreements, what's going on? They must have writers for rewrites. I've never been on a set that doesn't have a writer. That's a big scab operation also.

DW: I know the answer before I ask it, but has there been any discussion about the fact that the companies plan to consolidate and carry out mass layoffs, and any preparation for that by the union?

SAG-AFTRA member: Nothing whatsoever. They haven't mentioned that as part of their negotiations, ever. They're not suited to lead that kind of a fight. They don't have any perspective of taking on these multinational corporations.

DW: What are some of your general conclusions from the strikes in regard to the overall situation of the working class, entertainment workers in particular? And the question of the union leadership?

SAG-AFTRA member: I see it in the general context of the situation in the country as a whole and the lack of genuine democracy. The people who have an outsized voice are the privileged, wealthy people. Everything goes their way.

It's a real dereliction of duty that we are kept out of the process and that the union is not transparent, that it's not democratic, that we're told what to do. As if these union leaders are our bosses and not there to represent us. It's very clear that they are working "across the aisle" with their friends, and working class actors are not included on that.

I will never agree with a "stand-up strike" or an "internal agreement strike," where everybody doesn't go out. When you continue laboring for the people you're striking against, so they can profit off of it while you're supposedly "striking," it's just insane.

If someone puts out an idea I agree with, I will amplify it even when it comes out of the wrong person's mouth, because I want as many people to hear those ideas as possible. Because I think we should get used to the idea that there should never be a billionaire, and that solidarity amongst the working class is the only answer to all of that.

But it is a really hard line to walk. Eye-opening things happened this summer. To see the UPS deal reached the night before they were supposed to strike, after Sean O'Brien had made such a name for himself being the guy who would speak up for the working class...

Now we're seeing the same situation play out with the UAW. It all feels like a shell game sometimes, it's very frustrating.

DW: To other workers, what would you say? What do you think they should know?

SAG-AFTRA member: I think it's important what you talk about continuously, the rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled committees, where you meet in transparency and become part of what determines things. It's not right, what exists. Unions that order you around, tell you nothing.

That is easier said than done, because as soon as you start talking about that with some people, there is pushback because they do want to trust and believe in the union leadership. It takes a good deal to shake that. It's sort of like a CIA op, right? "I agree with everything you're saying, just not the way you say it." The civility police kicks in.

Beyond that, it's not easy to organize against what exists. There have been times that the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy has told WSWS reporters to leave picket lines, not pass out flyers. I don't know why they think they own the picket line. It's so outrageous that they would call security from the companies that they're striking to remove your reporters. It's so illustrative of whose side they're really on.

It's difficult to organize a rank-and-file committee in the middle of a strike. We should talk about it every chance we get, but it's difficult when

people are stressed and scared to upset the boat. Anyway, you have to take the opportunity to organize with your fellow workers because we know what we're going to get will inevitably not be good enough, and we're going to be striking or going to have to strike again. We really need to have solidarity amongst all the workers. There are impediments, and we have to consider how to overcome them.

Your union bosses are not going to be the ones to save you. We are going to have to do this ourselves. The rank and file are the ones who are going to have to do it.

The protests that are happening over Gaza, it's been pretty remarkable to see all of the working class people who are there, either refusing to load ships or blocking the entrance to weapons manufacturers. I think the pressure is building, and there will be a breaking point. I am seeing that now, and I'm really thrilled when people finally rise up and say, we will not be a party to this anymore.

DW: What are the pressures in Hollywood to line up behind Israel or condemn the Palestinians?

SAG-AFTRA member: Two weeks ago the head of film at CAA [talent and sports agency] had to step back from her leadership position for a tweet that said something about the fact that we're witnessing a genocide. Israeli scholars, Holocaust scholars are saying this is a genocide! Palestinians are saying we're suffering a genocide. Israeli officials are more or less boasting about committing a genocide. But if you criticize this, you're an antisemite.

Last week, a major comedy agent was threatened by one of her clients for retweeting a pro-Palestinian, anti-genocide message. It was simply pro-humanity.

So there's pressure. But there's also more opposition. On the picket lines, you see the younger ones in particular, who are coming from every background. Every color, shape, nationality. They're not confused about things, they're pretty clear. That's where my hope really lies right now.

They don't feel beholden to the Democratic Party. They have no memory of when the Democratic Party even pretended to be a anti-war, non-cop-loving party. All of those allegiances are gone.

DW: Has the WSWS has been helpful to you?

SAG-AFTRA member: Oh, my gosh. Yes. I read your ideas. I love your perspective. I also admire how outspoken you are when so many people try to couch their words to protect people's feelings. Yes, I think it's great.



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