

Actors must mobilize now to stop SAG-AFTRA betrayal!

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The details of the tentative agreement announced Wednesday between the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and the entertainment giants have not yet been made public. SAG-AFTRA's negotiating committee voted unanimously for the deal, and it now goes to the union's national board for approval on Friday.

However, there is more than sufficient proof that SAG-AFTRA is betraying the 65,000 actors, who have been on determined strike since mid-July. Actors will have to mobilize themselves to prevent this sellout, which is already being celebrated by the companies, the media and the Biden White House, all of them inveterate enemies of the working class. There is no time to lose.

The blessing of the Biden administration is one of the surest signs of the sordid operation being carried out against working actors. Biden (or one of his ghost writers) took time off from presiding over the mass murder of Palestinians, to praise the deal as one "that allows our entertainment industry to continue telling the stories of America." Dust thrown in the actors' eyes!

The White House statement lyingly goes on to claim that over the past three years, "workers have won historic victories that ensure record pay, record benefits, and an economy that grows from the middle out and bottom up." The number of strikes is on the rise, despite the best efforts of the union bureaucracies, because workers are falling farther and farther behind under the corporate warmonger Biden.

SAG-AFTRA, like the Writers Guild of America (WGA) before it, announced the strike was over before the membership had even had a chance to glance at, much less study, the proposed deal. Behind-closed-doors negotiations between SAG-AFTRA and the group of corporate executives in the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) who run Disney, Netflix, NBCUniversal, Warner Bros., Discovery and the rest having been going on for weeks.

Rank-and-file actors were excluded from the process and kept entirely in the dark. Their lives and careers were being bargained over by multi-millionaire executives, on one side, and millionaire union officials, such as Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, SAG-AFTRA's National Executive Director, who took in more than \$1,000,000 in 2022, on the other. Nothing good could have come out of these talks. The companies, under immense pressure from Wall Street, are absolutely determined to lower costs and cut jobs at the expense of workers in the industry. The union, which upholds the economic and cultural status quo, merely maneuvered for weeks seeking a means of capitulating they hoped would not spark an open revolt.

That there was a strike, and not a union surrender July 1, only came about because of a rank-and-file revolt in June, in the form of an open

letter warning SAG-AFTRA leaders not to sell the actors out. A second letter signed by thousands of actors recently cautioned about the same danger. SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher's demagogic denunciations of "corporate greed" and threats to "break down the gates of Versailles" never meant anything, as the WSWs pointed out at the time. Now that language has been supplanted by talk of reconciliation and partnership.

In an email Wednesday to their members, SAG-AFTRA officials, first of all, announced that "all picket locations are closed. We will be in touch in the coming days with information about celebration gatherings around the country." This rotten apparatus is already preparing to "celebrate" itself and its deal. What if actors decide to throw the contract back in the union's face? Is that permitted in the "democratic" SAG-AFTRA?

The email goes on to assert that the proposed agreement is "valued at over one billion dollars." Who is that supposed to impress? The union bureaucrats are so shortsighted and forgetful they fail to recall that the AMPTP asserted *in July* that the "deal that SAG-AFTRA walked away from on July 12 is worth more than \$1 billion in wage increases, pension and health contributions and residual increases and includes first-of-their-kind protections over its three-year term, including expressly with respect to AI." How much actual change was there over the course of 118 days? The media and the companies, for their own obvious purposes, to insure a ratification, are insisting that all the "concessions" were made by the AMPTP. No one should believe that for a second. The evidence strongly suggests otherwise.

SAG-AFTRA claims that "we have achieved a deal of extraordinary scope that includes 'above-pattern' minimum compensation increases, unprecedented provisions for consent and compensation that will protect members from the threat of AI, and for the first time establishes a streaming participation bonus."

It is widely understood that rank-and-file actors, along with every other section of the working class, have witnessed a significant decline in living standards in recent years, in part due to inflation, in part due to the introduction of streaming and other technologies and strategies employed by the conglomerates.

Variety reported earlier this year that since 2020 SAG-AFTRA membership had increased by 10,000 while dues income had "remained flat," revealing a fall in real wages. In any given year, an estimated 50 percent of SAG-AFTRA's members "won't earn a penny for acting; only 5-15% of members earn enough to qualify for the health care threshold of \$26,470." *Variety* estimated that only *two* percent of the union's membership "safely earn a middle class wage. ... The workforce is becoming ever more precarious, gig-like and uncertain."

In the face of this, SAG-AFTRA asked for a pittance, an 11 percent increase in minimums in year one of the contract, 4 percent in year two and 4 percent in year three, for a total of 19 percent. This would not have covered the cost-of-living increases in cities such as New York and Los Angeles over the next several years, much less have made up for the decades of decline.

In its original proposal, the union argued that without the 11 percent “inflation-adjusted year-one wage increase, members will be working for lower real wages in 2023 than they earned in 2020 and would likely still be working for lower real wages even in 2026.” But this is precisely what SAG-AFTRA *has* accepted. The AMPTP offered a miserly 5 percent, 4 percent and 3.5 percent, which would have left actors even farther behind.

On October 24, according to *Forbes*, the employers increased their offer to 7 percent for the first year. “Two days later,” the business magazine notes, “SAG-AFTRA lowered its demand two percentage points to 9% for a first-year increase. Clearly, both sides are making concessions with respect to pay increases for minimum rates.” Yes, what sort of concessions SAG-AFTRA finally made we have yet to learn. But we already know, if the tentative agreement is implemented, that actors “will be working for lower real wages in 2023 than they earned in 2020 and would likely still be working for lower real wages even in 2026.”

As for the “streaming participation bonus” SAG-AFTRA boasts about, it seems to fall in line with the derisory agreement reached by the WGA and indeed sheds light on the character of the latter deal.

Under “New Media Revenue Sharing,” SAG-AFTRA initially demanded that casts should “share in the revenue generated when their performances are exhibited on streaming platforms. This would allow casts to share in the success of high-performing shows.” The union was proposing that a princely 2 percent of the revenue generated by a streaming show be paid to performers. SAG-AFTRA suggested using a Content Valuation tool to determine the value of a given series.

The AMPTP resolutely rejected any such proposal, including any invasion of their business secrets—information that is only secret to workers, not other industry executives. In any case, it was up to the union to come back time after time with a less costly proposal, one that would not affect the multi-billion-dollar corporations or their thief-executives.

SAG-AFTRA abandoned its Content Valuation tool but still stuck briefly to its demand for 2 percent of revenue. Then they cut that in half and suggested 1 percent. “Despite this concession by SAG-AFTRA,” *Forbes* observes bluntly, “the CEOs of the major studios comprising the AMPTP stood firm on their commitment to not accept a revenue share at any percentage.”

On October 11, SAG-AFTRA then presented a proposal to the AMPTP asking for 57 cents per subscriber. Because the proposal would have cost an estimated \$500 million annually, the studios walked away from the negotiating table calling the offer an “untenable economic burden.”

Variety asserts that, contrary to many media reports, negotiations broke down in late October not due to disagreements about Artificial Intelligence (AI), but rather over the huge gap between what the union was proposing, with its supposed \$500 million price tag, and what the giant firms were willing to fork out, \$20 million in streaming residuals.

In passing, *Variety* debunks claims about the “exceptional” WGA contract. The publication points out that the Writers Guild “was able

to establish the principle that successful shows on streaming should pay more. But to do that, it was willing to settle for a relatively small amount of money—around \$5 million a year at the outset, according to sources.” This is pathetic, rounded off, as a percentage, it would amount to approximately zero. This is not the proverbial foot in the door, it is the door slammed in one’s face. *Variety* notes that the “WGA did not respond to a request for comment.” That’s not surprising, since it helps expose the betrayal the entire WGA leadership, including various “left” figures, carried out.

What formula SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP finally arrived at on streaming residuals remains to be seen, but we safely predict it will not make a dent in the companies’ bottom lines nor halt the long-term hemorrhaging of actors’ incomes.

AI was reportedly one of the last sticking points. This is a particular concern for actors, who rightfully fear that the studios, networks and streaming services are planning to scan them for a one-time fee and use those images over and over again. SAG-AFTRA’s claim that it has obtained “consent and compensation guardrails on the use of AI” is not to be trusted. The individual actor, desperate for work, is not in a position to refuse the demands of the companies and expect to be employed. “Consent” here is an entirely empty concept. As long as the corporate stranglehold over film and television production continues, actors have every right to insist on a total ban on scanning carried out by the companies.

The SAG-AFTRA officialdom, like the WGA’s, has proven worse than worthless as a means of working class struggle. After a combined more than 200 days on strike, and despite the unquestionable militancy and solidarity of strikers, neither union has been able to defend or advance its members’ position to the slightest degree in the face of “existential” threats. On the contrary, the decline in living conditions, incomes and jobs will continue. The unions have failed utterly, and workers need to draw the necessary conclusions.

Both the writers’ and actors’ contracts, if the latter is accepted, will leave workers unprepared for the consolidation and contraction of film and television production, by as much as one-third, according to certain Hollywood experts.

The WGA and SAG-AFTRA leaderships act as agents of the companies and the social and cultural status quo. They have capitulated to the conglomerates on every important issue. Their claims about “exceptional” and “extraordinary” contracts are lies, intended to lull writers and actors to sleep.

The central lesson of this year’s “dual strike” is already clear: Actors need to take the current struggle out of the hands of the affluent, complacent SAG-AFTRA leadership, build rank-and-file committees of their own and broaden the strike to the entire entertainment industry.

A new leadership has to emerge among writers and actors that consciously opposes the profit system, which is incompatible with both the economic and artistic interests of workers in the entertainment industry, and will work toward the socialist reorganization of the economy and cultural life.



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