

Opposition mounts to SAG-AFTRA sellout agreement: “This contract will be the death of working class actors”

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On every critical issue, the deal reached between the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) is a betrayal of actors’ interests. Contrary to the soporific, dishonest claims of union officials, this isn’t a matter of “not getting everything we wanted.”

Rather, SAG-AFTRA is actually facilitating the increasing impoverishment and abuse—and, ultimately, under-employment and unemployment—of working class actors, along with other crew members and film professionals.

Despite its leaders’ demagoguery and occasional tub-thumping, SAG-AFTRA has proven to be nothing more than an agency through which the giant conglomerates break down actors’ resistance and demoralize them as part of the campaign to lower costs and destroy jobs. Actors have made sacrifices for months, losing work, income and possibly homes or apartments, so that union officials could sell them down the river in secret negotiations, while they continue to receive exorbitant salaries.

On Artificial Intelligence (AI), minimum increases and streaming residuals, actors will be going backward if the contract is implemented. Rank-and-file actors need to reject this deal and take the struggle out of the hands of well-paid leaders who only betray their interests. There is no time to lose.

The SAG-AFTRA officialdom and its toadies, certain affluent performers, the entertainment media and the Biden administration all celebrated the “end of the strike,” even before rank-and-file actors had a chance to look at the agreement, much less vote on it. All those forces want performers back at work under the company-dictated conditions so that the billion-dollar profit machinery can be set in motion once again. However, despite the barrage of self-congratulation and all the false assertions being made about the “history-making” character of the tentative agreement, opposition is growing.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges actors to reject the agreement and develop rank-and-file committees to take control of the strike from the SAG-AFTRA apparatus.

On AI, the union has given a green light to the conglomerates. The agreement allows the companies to create and use “Employment-Based Digital Replicas,” created in connection with employment in a particular film, and “Independently-Created Digital Replicas,” in which there is no such connection.

The agreement merely requires “consent,” which must be “be clear and conspicuous.” As the WSWWS has pointed out, and many others have as well, “consent” in this case is largely meaningless. At any given moment, 90 percent of actors are out of work, and most do not earn a livable income in their chosen field. In the face of powerful producers and giant companies that can make or break their careers, refuse to hire or even

blacklist them for saying no, how many actors will have the ability and professional standing to refuse “consent” to such replicas?

One of the most widely publicized critics of the tentative agreement’s AI provisions has been actress Justine Bateman, who has legitimately denounced the contract for its failure to protect actors from the companies’ predatory plans. She tweeted November 11 that she had “spent time over the past eight months writing op-eds, doing press interviews, and posting on social media to warn my fellow entertainment workers about how the studios/streamers mean to discard you with generative AI.”

Bateman further argued that “it’s unconscionable what the CEOs are doing ... it would be immoral of me to not tell you just how the actors and crew, in particular, are going to be abused.” She went on: “I’ve said from the beginning that the use of generative AI will collapse the structure of this business. I want the actors and crew to have enough self-respect to turn over a table and flip the CEOs off as it happens. They’re going to leave you with nothing left to lose.”

Chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland responded to Bateman that “There was no way to just say ‘no’ to AI ... There was never going to be a deal where they would agree to limit themselves from using any form of AI.”

This is simply an admission of bankruptcy. Why does SAG-AFTRA exist? Merely to slow down slightly the rate at which jobs and incomes are destroyed? This is not presumably why union members pay Crabtree-Ireland \$1 million a year, to have him tell them the union can do nothing.

It gets worse. Anthony Rapp, SAG-AFTRA National Board member (and, incidentally, the individual who attempted to destroy Kevin Spacey’s career) was asked point-blank whether employers were “allowed to make consent to a digital replica a condition of employment.” His reply on X/Twitter is a classic of sophistry and deceit: “It’s complicated. As an actor, there are all sorts of aspects of the gig we consent to as conditions of employment: speaking the text, wearing costumes, showing up for work. If we said no to any of those things, we wouldn’t get the gig. This is like that.” As though being obliged to sign away one’s face and features to a company that will take every opportunity to misuse and exploit them were a perfectly reasonable condition of employment!

Rapp’s remark provoked understandable astonishment and outrage.

One individual, responding directly, observed, “So the answer is yes, mgmnt [management] can deny employment to a performer who doesn’t consent to a digital replica. I appreciate you replying, but I vehemently disagree, that an AI scan is the same as a costume or showing up to work on time.”

Another commentator chimed in, “That is not even remotely a fair comparison. I urge all my friends in sag-aft to vote no. Hell no.”

A third pointed out, “Not getting hired because you refused to wear a costume is reasonable. Not getting hired because you won’t allow a corporation to puppeteer your body in whatever way generates the most profit is a dystopian nightmare.”

An additional comment on X/Twitter: “This contract is an #ExistentialCrisis. It’s literally like bleeding to death slowly. Won’t need SAG-AFTRA & IATSE in 5-10 years & Teamsters in the industry will lose their jobs. Human beings will mean nothing... except the biggies. Should fight this now or lose all later.”

SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher took the opportunity Monday to denounce “naysayers” who were daring to criticize the deal. According to *Variety*, Drescher “urged the membership to listen carefully to the details, ‘if you haven’t yet been poisoned by contrarians.’”

Drescher, as defensive as every union traitor who gets found out, denied that anyone had been “thrown under the bus,” as Bateman had correctly asserted, and complained that such comments were “very inflammatory and unfortunate, because it’s using social media and chat rooms to advance someone’s personal agenda.” Drescher castigated “some low-level people who are buzzing in almost a way that I feel is detrimental to the greater good.” Why not next denounce “outside agitators”?

SAG-AFTRA member Leila Charles responded to Drescher on X/Twitter: “Damn. Earlier today, those of us who are concerned about being coerced to sign away digital replicas of ourselves were called ‘poisonous contrarians.’ Now we’re ‘Low-Level’ Critics. With union reps like these, who needs Studio CEOs???”

Charles submitted an expanded comment to the WSWWS:

“I will be voting a hard NO on this tentative agreement. The language around consent on AI completely sells out actors, especially non-stars. If we have to sign away our consent to digital reproduction in order to book a job, most actors, desperate to make ends meet, will sign away. The few actors who refuse will simply be replaced or not allowed to audition at all.

“I’ve seen the argument by the negotiating committee that there are always conditions to employment, such as speaking lines, wearing costumes, and showing up to work on time, as if to imply that doing my job as an actress is the same as signing away my digital rights.

“If this was the operating assumption of some people on the negotiating committee, it’s no wonder they didn’t fight to protect us.

“This contract will be the death of working class actors. Only the major stars will be able to weather this assault by the Studios, and even they won’t be able to hang on for long.

“We must vote NO on this tentative agreement. If we give away these rights, we will never be able to claw them back. We must stand together to protect each other.”

As significant as the Artificial Intelligence issue is, it not only the aspect of the proposed contract that represents a betrayal.

Wages have been declining for every sector of the entertainment industry workforce for years, through a combination of concessions contracts, the emergence of streaming platforms and the various additional means by which the corporations cheat and swindle actors and others. Only 5 to 15 percent of SAG-AFTRA members currently earn enough to qualify for healthcare. Only 2 percent, according to a *Variety* estimate, “safely earn a middle class wage. ... The workforce is becoming ever more precarious, gig-like and uncertain.”

Forbes pointed out earlier this year that Pew Research estimates households have to make \$48,500 or less “to be considered lower-income. Because the mean salary of actors is \$46,960, with over 80% making less than \$26,000, the majority are considered lower-income.”

The 2020 SAG-AFTRA contract provided for an 8.5 percent increase over three years. By October 2023, inflation had climbed 13.9 percent in the US since January 2020, a figure that underestimates the true economic impact of rising prices. In California, where many actors live, between January 2020 and June 2023, prices increased by 17.9 percent, i.e., actors

living in that state faced price hikes *double* the rate of the SAG-AFTRA’s contract’s increases. In New York City as well, housing costs and food prices have soared.

SAG-AFTRA officials promised to address this in the 2023 contract. In July the union blustered that actors needed “an 11 percent general wage increase in year one so our members can recover from record inflation during the previous contract term.”

The union further argued that “Without an 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 will happen now under the proposed agreement.

The tentative deal includes a mere 7 percent increase in the first year, 4 percent in the contract’s second year and 3.5 percent in the third, a total of 14.5 percent, which doesn’t begin to cover what has been lost in recent years, much less cost-of-living increases over the next three. This is simply handing the massive corporations—operated by parasites who add absolutely nothing to film and television production, who in fact only detract and damage—billions of dollars more in profits.

The agreement on streaming residuals is an obvious and thorough-going capitulation, as wretched as the terms recently accepted by the Writers Guild of America. It is a pittance, which rounds off to near zero, which is what most actors will receive.

Again, SAG-AFTRA made a great deal of noise in June about obtaining compensation from streaming platforms, who have robbed actors and writers blind for years, “to reflect the value we bring to the streamers who profit from our labor.” The union proposed that casts “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.”

SAG-AFTRA then repeatedly lowered its demands, from 2 percent of revenue, to 1 percent, to \$1 per streaming subscriber, to \$0.57 per subscriber. The companies refused to give up anything, and the union simply folded.

Variety pointed out a few weeks ago that there was a huge gap between what the union was (finally) proposing, with its supposed \$500 million price tag, and what the firms were willing to pay, \$20 million in a bonus plan along the lines of what the WGA submitted to. Who won?

As the same publication explained this week “the union did not get one of its top priorities: a share of revenue from each streaming platform.” Instead, “the union won a ‘streaming participation bonus’ that will be worth about \$40 million annually, according to Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, the union’s top negotiator,” an amount to be divvied up among hundreds or thousands of actors. In other words, the union, after months of a strike, managed to give away *more than 90 percent* of its demand on residuals.

As we suggested before, this is not a foot in the door, but a door slammed in actors’ faces. In 2022, *two* Netflix executives *each* received total compensation greater than this amount, \$51.1 million and \$50.3 million, respectively. Over the past five years, the *three* highest-paid entertainment industry executives made a combined \$1.1 billion!

The “Streaming Payment Distribution Fund,” a fund out of which 25 percent of the \$40 million annual bonus money will be paid to performers working in streaming but *not* on the most successful series, is another fraud. The beneficiaries of the so-called “Robin Hood fund,” like actors working on the series eligible for the other 75 percent of the “bonus,” will continue to see pennies in compensation. Providing some insight into the outlook of those who run the industry, studio executives have denounced this pathetic scheme as “wealth redistribution” and “socialism.”

The SAG-AFTRA union apparatus has proven worthless because it accepts the corporate chokehold over film and television production and adjusts itself to what the companies claim they can afford. The results will be disastrous for actors. The giant companies, directed from Wall Street,

are committed to devastating the lives and conditions of tens of thousands of actors and other industry workers, with the assistance of the union bureaucracies.

The development of the strike requires that it be taken out of the hands of the SAG-AFTRA apparatus, through the building of rank-and-file committees controlled by the actors themselves. These committees will begin from what actors and other workers and artists need—decent wages, residuals that reflect what performers contribute, a ban on digital replicas, an end to the profit system’s strangling of cultural life—and not what will fill the pockets of super-rich executives and investors.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges actors to vote “no” on the tentative agreement and begin to build rank-and-file committees that will democratically, implacably fight for the needs and interests of those who produce everything of value.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact