

Widespread resistance from actors to SAG-AFTRA betrayal on Artificial Intelligence, streaming residuals

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There is growing anger and opposition within the membership of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (SAG-AFTRA) to the tentative agreement recently reached by the actors union with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

As there should be! The deal, currently being voted on, is a thoroughgoing fraud, which the union, in conjunction with the media, the Biden White House and rest of the establishment, is now attempting to perpetrate on the 65,000 striking actors.

The agreement is a sellout of actors' interests and a betrayal even of what SAG-AFTRA claimed was the *minimum* it would accept in the recent negotiations: decent wage increases, a share of streaming revenue and protection against artificial intelligence (AI). The deal provides for none of those things. In fact, the agreement, if it is accepted, will worsen performers' living standards, offer them almost zero in streaming residuals, leave them vulnerable to the AI plans of the giant corporations and prepare no one for the major attacks on jobs that are coming.

Much of the resistance by rank-and-file actors to the deal has focused on the issue of AI and the ability and clearcut plans of the conglomerates to create digital replicas that will replace thousands of working class actors. As it turns out, the "guardrails" and protections promised by the SAG-AFTRA leadership are non-existent. The companies are merely required to ask for "consent," but if the consent is not forthcoming, the performer will most likely not be hired.

At a "deal explainer" held by SAG-AFTRA November 13, reported by *Rolling Stone*, the union's national executive director and chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland "filtered more than 1,000 questions, with one person asking if actors could be required to give AI consent as a condition of employment."

"Yes, they can ask you for that," Crabtree-Ireland replied, in the Zoom call. "If you can't reach agreement on that, then yes, they can go and hire somebody else instead of you."

This alone should result in the rejection of the contract and the removal of the struggle from the hands of a leadership that acknowledges its own uselessness from the point of view of actors' interests.

The contract has even aroused opposition on SAG-AFTRA's national board. Shaan Sharma, an alternate member of the negotiating committee and a board member, asked *Rolling Stone*, "Did the negotiating committee honor the commitment they made to the members so that while they were throwing their bodies on the streets walking in circles they knew that they wouldn't be let down in

anything really crucial that motivated them to strike in the first place?"

Sharma makes the obvious point that if "you want to get hired, you have to be ready to consent to be replicated, so there are people who are out there saying that consent at the time of engagement is coercion because they won't hire you unless you give them those rights." Of course, it is coercion, with powerful corporations lined up against actors desperate for work.

Sharma shed a little light on the sordid process by which the SAG-AFTRA leadership capitulated to the giant firms on AI and other critical issues. He asserted that the national board meeting that voted on the contract was "the first thing that happened in this entire process that did not happen with integrity." The meeting was so short, Sharma explained, "that people can't have any faith that their board members understood what they approved."

Sharma alleges, according to *Rolling Stone*, that "the committee was in such a rush they didn't take the time to understand the impact of what they were agreeing to. 'There's also things that were done in the kind of mad scramble to close a deal in the final weeks, which was essentially the pressure applied by the AMPTP and the CEOs, the threats to cancel more shows, and the pressure from A-listers to just take a deal. There were a number of things that just eroded the strength of the majority of our negotiating committee that, for me, made the last few weeks sad.'"

To spell it out: wealthy company executives like Bob Iger of Disney and Ted Sarandos of Netflix and a group of millionaire performers issued the orders for a return to work and SAG-AFTRA officials jumped to obey. The Biden administration was also involved. It is a repugnant spectacle, although entirely typical of the way in which every union bureaucracy, nothing more than an arm of management, operates.

Rolling Stone also points out that the "Background Artists Coalition, a group advocating for workers' rights for background players, has criticized the union's AI deal points and has asked leadership to release the full agreement." Katrine Hoyt, a co-chair of the Background Artists Coalition, told the publication that "she'd like to see the full agreement before placing her vote: 'Whether it's 500 pages or five pages it doesn't matter, but we need to see the whole agreement.'"

The union has refused to release the actual agreement, claiming—revealingly—that the deal is not yet completed! This didn't prevent these scoundrels from declaring the "strike is over" and launching into an appalling and inappropriate round of self-

congratulation. Actors are supposed to vote to approve a deal into which all sorts of changes and fine print can still be introduced. This is a corrupt and discredited proceeding.

Sharma, a member of the board, is diplomatic. Others speak far more strongly about the betrayal.

SAG-AFTRA member Kellen Goff recently tweeted, “The ‘guardrails’ for AI that SAG claims to have won in this contract are almost non-existent. I won’t be voting to ratify the contract as is, even if it won’t make a difference. It’s nowhere near safe enough for any actor. With this, they set the stage to endanger the profession.”

Actress Jessie Pridemore simply tweeted, “Reject the offer.” Voice actor Sean Chiplock commented, “Forget the ‘historic trend.’ Forget the assurances we’re being fed about a deal we haven’t gotten to see in full. Forget the PROMISES (that aren’t in writing). Vote No so we can fight for a better future instead of just giving it up entirely.”

Actress Sara Cravens has posted numerous messages, including this, “This contract feels to me as the opposite of why we have a union in the first place.” She also commented: “I simply cannot see how I can vote yes on something that will literally wipe out entire sections of my industry.” Addressing the negotiating committee, Cravens appealed, “Please I beg you, listen to your members. The meetings have been full of thoughtful, respectful, concerned actors begging you to not wipe us out. ... The meetings by SAG that were supposed to inform us on our contract gains, actually solidified me feeling worse about this contract.” And, “as a working voice actor for 20 years, I fear this language is the death of me.”

Zimbabwean-born actor Belsheber Rusape Jr. argued on X/Twitter that the “SAG agreement has ‘exceptions to consent’ for monopolizing your likeness and making money without you actually getting work? They didn’t fight the problems, they just reworded it to be more marketable to the greedy producers! This vote ... better be a unanimous ‘No’.” Voice actor Andrew Boa added, “I really was hoping things would have looked better after someone from the [negotiating] committee clarified it, but it still sounds brutal.”

Voice actress Francesca Monet Calo pointed out that the “people who are REALLY protected here with these are those who have a stronger voice. It does not protect the working actor, the day players, the BG [background] actors. No one is going to steal my eyes to create a new actor. But I could lose jobs for saying no.” In the end, “what will it matter how great everything else is if we lose our jobs to AI or saying no to it?”

Nicholas Rainville commented that the “main question I’m still waiting to see answered is how any union actor who does not want to give consent will ever get studio work again? It’s going to become a contractual prerequisite, this seems unbelievably obvious. The union is allowing members to be blackballed.”

Actress Kate Bond further observed that Crabtree-Ireland “has stated on multiple occasions (a zoom member meeting, an Instagram live last night) that if you do not consent to be scanned you just don’t get the job, and that’s it.”

Recent news reports also reveal the grotesque and insulting character of the streaming “bonus” obtained by SAG-AFTRA. Continuously lowering its demands, the union settled for a fund estimated to be worth a paltry \$40 million a year. If a series reaches more than 20 percent of a streaming service’s US subscribers within 90 days, a high barrier to surpass, performers will qualify for the bonus.

As *Indie Wire* noted pointedly, “\$40 million is an impressive number but it’s also: the budget of ‘The Fabelmans,’ less than what

Dwayne Johnson could make on his upcoming Amazon holiday movie, and about the same as Warner Bros. Discovery CEO David Zaslav’s 2022 pay package.”

In fact, \$40 million annually is a rounding error for companies like Amazon, Disney and Netflix.

Of this miserable “bonus,” 75 percent goes directly to principal performers, *Indie Wire* points out, on the given successful series. “The other 25 percent goes into a fund allocated to all other members working on streaming who qualify.”

The online publication continues, actors whose show doesn’t reach the “upper echelon” will “get a cut of a pot worth about \$10 million, minus the undetermined amount that winds up paid into benefit plan contributions. If only 5,000 members end up qualifying, that’s an extra \$2,000 in your pocket a year. If it’s closer to 20,000, then only \$500.”

One has to restrain oneself. Crabtree-Ireland, who “earns” one million dollars per annum in his post as chief union sellout, had the temerity to inform *Indie Wire* that “the fund is designed to make it a ‘sustainable career’ for working performers and those in the middle class, people who need every dollar in order to qualify for the guild’s health plan. The guild views this as a creative way to get them a little extra cash.”

Crabtree-Ireland went on, “For many actors, something like \$1,000 or \$2,000 can mean the difference between qualifying for health insurance or not. It can mean everything for someone who’s making \$23,000-\$24,000 a year and that’s the difference for their benefits. So I do think that it has real significant potential to change how actors perceive the way the streaming business is treating them.”

The union sees itself as being in the business of getting “a little extra cash” from companies raking in billions! What a disgrace, what abject cowardice!

Again, there is not a moment to lose. The WSWs urges the rejection of this rotten agreement and the establishment of democratically-controlled rank-and-file committees that will renew the strike and set it on a different course: for minimum increases of at least 25 percent in the first year; for a ban on digital replicas as long as the conglomerates have control over them; for residuals corresponding to the massive profits being made; for preparation against the coming attack on jobs; and for the socialist reorganization of economic, social and cultural life.



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