

SAG-AFTRA releases full tentative agreement, amidst growing distrust, criticism

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Officials of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) released the Memorandum of Agreement (MoA), the tentative deal reached with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), on Friday at noon Pacific time.

Voting on the contract began prior to the union's membership having a chance to examine its contents. Similarly, SAG-AFTRA declared the strike "over" before the ratification process began.

The agreement betrays actors' interests all along the line and should be rejected.

On Artificial Intelligence (AI), the agreement opens the door to the abuse of many actors and their replacement by digital replicas. The agreement on streaming residuals is ludicrous, providing a pittance in "bonuses" in the face of years of thieving by the giant corporations. The so-called Robin Hood Fund will mean "a little extra cash," in SAG-AFTRA National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland's own words, for actors on streaming shows that do not qualify for the "bonus." The increases on minimum pay will not make up for losses due to inflation and concessions contracts in the past or for price increases over the next three years.

Criticism is widespread. Actor and SAG-AFTRA national board member Matthew Modine, one of nine board members to vote against the proposed deal, issued a strongly worded attack on the deal prior to Thanksgiving.

Modine wrote that he could not "endorse a contract that compromises the independence and financial futures of the performers." Focusing on the issue of AI, the actor contended that in the current tentative agreement, "the word 'consent' is evoked at least a dozen times. It is purposefully vague and demands union members to release their autonomy. Agreeing to consent means contractually giving a go-ahead to our employers to digitally capture and reconstruct our physicality and our voices using artificial intelligence. Once this information is collected, a member can be regenerated whenever and however the contract holder chooses forever."

He argued that a given performer consenting to a digital replica "means surrendering your physical and vocal identity to an employer. A Faustian bargain. If this contract is ratified,

every contract moving forward may require, as a condition of employment, members to consent to the use of artificial intelligence *as defined by an employer*."

Modine criticized the propaganda being churned out by the SAG-AFTRA officials in favor of the deal, noting that the "union's marketing department is enthusiastically telling members to approve this contract. You should know that the expenses of making and mailing fliers, not to mention the salaries of the marketing department, are expenses paid for by members. It's inappropriate for the union to tell a member how to vote without presenting the pluses and minuses of an issue. To do so is disingenuous at best and duplicitous at worst."

He described in unflattering terms the SAG-AFTRA National Board meeting at which the majority voted to support the new deal, as others already have. He described the board members sitting through "what should be described as a Readers Digest explanation of perhaps the most consequential contract in the merged union's history." Modine further contended that at this meeting Crabtree-Ireland "explained that it wasn't necessary to read or discuss the contract in its entirety. Not being fully informed about this contract is like being told that Chicken McNuggets are only made of chicken meat."

The tentative agreement makes agreeing to a digital replica a condition of employment. A studio can refuse to hire someone who refuses such "consent." Modine asserted that saying "No" will "create a three-tier division between members," including a first category of those with sufficient clout "to say no and negotiate their own terms," a second category who will "relent and succumb ... out of financial or career necessity" and a third group "of union members who refuse to consent and lose employment opportunities to those who do consent." He sardonically added a fourth category, the digital replicas themselves: "non-union synthesized scab performers digitally cobbled together from dead actors."

Modine finally argued that "Consent, in the context of this agreement, is tyranny. It is submission. If ratified, SAG-AFTRA members who consent will be digitally exploited in ways not clearly defined and are currently beyond our individual abilities to control." Ratification will result "in greater job reductions — especially for background and stunt performers. This loss of SAG-AFTRA labor will negatively

impact our sister unions, primarily IATSE tradespeople and the Teamsters. The use of AI has already financially impacted voice performers in film, television, advertising, and animated films.”

Actor Alejandro Ray expressed support on X/Twitter for defeating the deal. “Our data is our leverage. Voting no.” Ray, to his credit, added this appeal to SAG-AFTRA members: “Getting ourselves a fair and equitable deal, starts with the solidarity of the Palestinian people. Count how many members on our national board who have or are currently supporting the genocide. They are compromised and must be removed. They cannot speak for us.” Jay Fox added, “This deal is painfully inadequate. Hard f----- no.” Gene Airs commented on X/Twitter, “What does @sagaftra hide that they want us to vote quickly without having as much info as possible?”

#sagafravoteno has attracted numerous tweets, including comments like this:

- Reading through the #SAGAFTRA MOA now. It’s not making be feel any better. Can I Vote NO twice? #sagafravoteno

- The fate of this industry and future generations is riding on this contract. Do not listen to “leadership” that sells you out. #SAGAFTRAvoteNO

- Resisting the urge to dope slap the SAG AFTRA leadership committee. Prematurely ending the strike to save your own pay checks is a short term gain with long term losses.

- All of these concerns are soooo valid, and none of them have been addressed adequately by @sagaftra. Which is why I am voting NO.

- Read this thread. It’s a spot on summation of why this agreement, as written, is so dangerous to the future of this industry. The bare minimum was hiring not being tied to “consenting” to have our voices scrubbed for AI trainers, and it doesn’t even offer that.

- Raised pensions and benefits aren’t even going to matter when there’s AI clones doing all the work for us. AI will come for us all. None of us are safe or exempt from this threat.

Stunt and background workers are among those most concerned by AI. According to an AFP report in August, “Studios are already requiring stunt and background performers to take part in high-tech 3D ‘body scans’ on set, often without explaining how or when the images will be used. Advancements in AI mean these likenesses could be used to create detailed, eerily realistic ‘digital replicas,’ which can perform any action or speak any dialogue its creators wish.”

AFP cited the comment of stunt coordinator Freddy Bouciegues to the effect that producers “could use these virtual avatars to replace ‘nondescript’ stunt performers—such as those playing pedestrians leaping out of the way of a car chase. ‘There could be a world where they said, ‘No, we don’t want to bring these 10 guys in... we’ll just add them in later via effects and AI. Now those guys are out of the job.’”

Director Neill Blomkamp told AFP that in as soon as six or

12 months, “AI will reach a point where it can generate photo-realistic footage like high-speed crashes based on a director’s instructions alone. At that point, ‘you take all of your CG (computer graphics) and VFX (visual effects) computers and throw them out the window, and you get rid of stunts, and you get rid of cameras, and you don’t go to the racetrack.’”

Along the same lines, the *New York Post* reported Thursday that “Hollywood stunt actors feel ‘screwed over’ by the deal struck to end the historically long actors’ strike and fear their industry will be ‘decimated’ by the move.

The performers, asserts the same article, “are concerned the contract negotiated by SAG-AFTRA is not strong enough at stopping studios creating ‘digital replicas’ of people ... Stunt performers and extras claim language in the contract allowing studios to use ‘the voice or likeness of the performer’ with the ‘purpose of portraying the performer’ in parts of a film or TV series the actor didn’t ‘actually perform’ sounds like a death sentence.” Rightfully, they fear the film and television industry’s “plan to ‘scan’ actors will eliminate the need for stunt doubles who carry out the physically demanding flips, jumps and other high adrenaline tasks during filming.”

Defeating the SAG-AFTRA contract is critical, but expecting that the same leadership that accepted this rotten deal will win what actors need is an illusion. Actors need to form rank-and-file committees in every film and television production center, which will organize a strike along radically different lines: for a ban on AI replicas of actors and stunt workers, for residuals that reflect the billions earned by the conglomerates that results from the labor of actors, writers and others, for a minimum increase in the first year of 25 percent, for a united struggle of workers in the entertainment industry against the corporate stranglehold on culture and for the socialist reorganization of economic and cultural life.



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