

Many actors, stunt workers, and now production assistants oppose tentative SAG-AFTRA agreement

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Opposition continues to mount among rank-and-file actors and entertainment workers generally after details of the tentative agreement between the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) were released last Friday. Voting started prior to the release, i.e., before there was a complete contract to read, and is set to end December 5.

SAG-AFTRA used the initial announcement of the agreement to shut down the powerful 118-day strike. Subsequently, 86 percent of the SAG-AFTRA's national board voted in favor of the deal, indicating thereby that they are prepared to resolve the struggle on the studios' terms.

The agreement is in fact entirely favorable to the multi-billion dollar studios and streaming giants, and actors should vote it down by the largest margin possible. It contains no protections for the misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI) by the studios, and it includes the setting aside of a mere \$40 million for streaming residuals, only available to actors if a series is seen by more than 20 percent of a streaming service's subscribers within 90 days. The \$40 million is less than many Hollywood executives *individually* make in one year, for their parasitical and anti-artistic efforts.

Minimum rate increases contained in the agreement are a meager 7 percent in the first year of the contract, followed by 4 percent in the second year and 3.5 percent in the third. These increases will do nothing to help the vast majority of actors who have to pursue second and often third jobs to make ends meet. According to Pew Research, 80 percent of actors earn less than \$26,000 a year, while 90 percent are unemployed at any given time.

Large numbers of performers and others have already expressed opposition to the deal on social media, and rightfully so.

One actor, for example, wrote on Twitter/X, "Vote NO on the SAG-AFTRA contract which will be the death of working class actors being able to have real careers in the industry. We need better protections against #AI and better residual structure for streaming."

Another wrote, "Common thread of you losing access to Health Plan, Loss of Union TV Spots, Meaningless streaming residuals & more is YOU voting YES on #SAGAFTRA contracts recommended by many of the same Union Officials for decades."

Background artists, who will most likely face significant job

losses due to unrestricted AI adoption, have been particularly vocal in their opposition to the contract.

The Background Artists Coalition recently wrote on Twitter/X, "Now @Wired reports that #SAGAFTRA TA #AI terms 'may not be able to protect performers' leading to fewer 'jobs available to both performers and crew as Hollywood becomes awash with synthetic performers.'"

In fact, industry analysts expect that the contract will eliminate most if not all jobs for puppeteers, stunt performers, voice dubbing work and other professions where the philistines running the studios and their associated sycophants envision such work easily being replaced by digital facsimiles.

Production Assistants United, a group that is hoping to unionize low-paid production assistants in the film and television industry, released a statement on Instagram expressing their opposition to the deal and encouraging their fellow workers in SAG-AFTRA to vote no.

"Today, we read the drafted agreement between SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP, and like many of you, we found the provisions around Artificial Intelligence to be insufficient and exploitative," the statement read.

"A vote for this contract, with these AI regulations, not only stands to threaten your profession, but ours as well. Using a digital replica raises a myriad of valid questions about what happens to our sets, cast and crews, both now and in the future. You shouldn't have to vote on a contract that seeks to replace you. PA's United encourages every performer to vote NO, if they haven't already."

In fact, the virtually unrestricted use of AI by the studios is what's causing the lion's share of opposition to the tentative agreement. Even before the agreement was released, actors and studio workers quite rightfully feared that the new technology would be utilized by the conglomerates to use actors' voices and images without their consent and thus sharply reduce costs of production at workers' expense. These fears were fully justified, as the latest agreement shows that SAG-AFTRA did nothing to fight for workers' demands to regulate the technology.

Family Ties actress and AI adviser to the SAG-AFTRA negotiating committee Justine Bateman wrote on Twitter/X after the tentative deal was reached, "Bottom line, we are in for a very unpleasant era for actors and crew."

While the deal contains language requiring an actor's consent

before their likeness or voice is replicated using AI tools, the agreement becomes even murkier when it comes to the question of “synthetic performers.” These are AI-generated likenesses, which, while often incorporating specific traits of a living actor or actress, do not, as a whole, immediately resemble the latter.

A synthetic performer could be, for example, a computer-generated compilation of multiple actors, in which traits are copied from all, with the affected performers facing a high burden of proof to demonstrate that specific features were actually stolen from them.

Moreover, even in instances when performers consent to allow their likenesses to be replicated, they aren’t exactly “free” to do so as such consent agreements will in fact be conditions for employment.

Responding to questions from rank-and-file union members at a recent union meeting, SAG-AFTRA national executive director and chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland revealed that the union leadership was well aware of, and in full agreement with the AI concessions demanded by the studios.

When asked if actors would be required to give AI consent as a condition of employment, Crabtree-Ireland responded, “Yes, they can ask you for that. If you can’t reach agreement on that, then yes, they can go and hire somebody else instead of you.”

In an even starker admission, when asked whether provisions could be put in place to prevent the studios from devastating the acting craft over time using such technologies, Crabtree-Ireland responded, “I don’t think we can guarantee that.”

These remarks indicate that SAG-AFTRA, like trade unions throughout the US and internationally, is not in any sense a workers’ organization, but rather an extension of management. As entertainment workers continue to suffer in large measure from low pay and few job opportunities, Crabtree-Ireland continues to make \$1 million in salary as union head. SAG-AFTRA national president Fran Drescher, while not officially drawing a salary from the union, has an estimate net worth of \$25 million.

The unrestrained use of AI in the film and television industry not only presents dangers to the livelihoods of tens of thousands of entertainment workers, but also presents a concerted attack against art and culture by the ruling elite. Having fed the public with a nearly endless stream of the most culturally base and depraved products—pro-military and police-state movies and TV, comic book superhero fare and sophomoric “comedies,” the ruling elite intends to lower the bar even further.

Even within the tightly controlled and socially conformist confines of the entertainment industry, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain the official narratives demanded by the Pentagon and Wall Street.

Numerous actors have already come out against the campaign of genocide being carried out by the Israeli regime in Gaza with the full support of the Biden administration. Fearing that such opposition from well-known celebrities could galvanize even broader layers of the population, the studios, with no opposition from the various guilds or IATSE, have begun blacklisting celebrities who dare to speak out against the campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Palestinians.

Actress Melissa Barrera was recently fired from

the *Scream* horror movie franchise for speaking out against the slaughter in the Gaza strip, referring to it, correctly, as “genocide and ethnic cleansing.”

Similarly, veteran actress Susan Sarandon was dropped by her talent agency UTA after she made remarks supporting the Palestinian people at a New York rally. Oakland-based filmmaker and musician Boots Riley’s talent agency was also recently unsuccessfully pressured to drop the performer after he participated in pro-Palestinian protests in the Bay Area.

Actors and the entertainment industry are at a definitive crossroads. Opportunities for decent paying jobs and adequate work, not to mention free speech rights, are under assault by the studios with the full support of the Biden administration and the trade union officialdom.

Actors and entertainment workers are aware of the treachery of SAG-AFTRA, having warned it on two separate occasions, in highly publicized open letters, not to make concessions to the studios. Anger at the union’s treachery, although justified, is not enough. Actors must organize themselves independently of SAG-AFTRA in rank and file committees to carry their struggle forward.

The strike must be renewed immediately and must spread to other sections of the entertainment industry and beyond. Production assistants, writers, theater workers, stunt workers, talent agency employees, artists, post-production editors and a multitude of other professions have an immense stake in the outcome of this struggle as well.

Workers should demand minimum increases of at least 25 percent in the first year, a ban on digital replicas under the control of the conglomerates, and a sharp increase in residuals for both streaming and traditional media. Demands must be immediately made to cease any and all retaliation against actors and other entertainment workers who speak out against the Palestinian genocide, and for the immediate restoration of all representation and employment and back pay for actors and other entertainment workers who have lost such opportunities.



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