

More reasons to oppose the SAG-AFTRA contract and build rank-and-file committees

David Walsh

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It becomes more obvious with almost every passing day that the contracts signed earlier this year by the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and Writers Guild of America (WGA) and tentatively accepted by the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) will only facilitate (1) the insatiable profit drive of the conglomerates and the enrichment of their executives; (2) the further worsening conditions for writers, actors and directors; and (3) the destruction of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of jobs.

In the last few days of voting, we urge SAG-AFTRA members to vote no, resume the strike on the basis of demands reflecting the real and urgent needs of actors and build rank-and-file committees to prosecute a serious struggle against the predatory companies. The Drescher-Crabtree-Ireland leadership and the national board as a whole have proven themselves to be conscious agents of those predators.

Actors are understandably angry and anxious about the disastrous implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI), through whose use the entertainment companies intend to destroy a vast swath of the industry and drastically lower costs. But the pitiful streaming “success bonus” and below-inflation minimum increases are also critical issues.

SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher sent out a message December 1 including a comment from actor Bryan Cranston to the effect that “Only Sociopaths” would consider opposing the rotten agreement. Millionaires like Drescher and Cranston are concerned with one thing, getting film and television production fully operational again, so they can continue to earn large incomes and protect the profits of the corporations. They couldn’t care less about the 80 percent of the union that makes poverty wages or worse.

Cranston’s remarks, which now apparently have been removed from Drescher’s message, generated outrage within the union’s rank and file.

The Background Artists Coalition, which fully expects its members’ jobs to be decimated in the future through AI, commented on X/Twitter:

As it’s antithetical to any #Labor action to abuse your

own #Union Membership & gaslighting #NOVOTE #Actors doesn’t serve #SAGAFTRA’s ethos of #Solidarity & #Inclusivity, it would appear, Fran Drescher’s imprimatur of Cranston’s manipulative screed is not only intended to bully #SAGAFTRA #Union #Actors, but also intended to suppress the vote. It’s sort of like flipping the poker table over when you’re afraid people may see you have a really bad hand & you’ve been lying; So you create enough division & smoke that nobody can see the exit signs. SUPPRESSING THE VOTE was how the south held folks down for decades. So we encourage EVERYBODY to ignore the vicious gaslighting & abuse & REJECT the proposed TA #VoteNO cuz #Actors DESERVE BETTER!

Actor Jeffrey Reeves, a vocal critic of the contract, observed that Cranston “thinks I’m a sociopath, maybe he meant Socialist? ... I didn’t miss a day on pickets w/courageous members. Helped few 2 their feet collapsed from heat but determined to get #FairContract. This ain’t that #SAGAFTRAVoteNo.”

The actor further commented, “#SAGAFTRA’s sent out an email! @frandrescher highlights only #Sociopaths would #SAGAFTRAVoteNO on the current @AMPTP that gets a thumbs up from #GeorgeClooney, Series Regulars & actors seeking reboots—all whom have private anti-#Ai deals. #YourUnionYourContractYourVote.”

Reeves also noted that “as long as I’ve been voting on #SAGAFTRA contracts, they’ve been sold as flawed, to be fixed in the next contract. Not once has that happened. We give away our value to every new technology & never get it back.”

Actor Bruce McKinnon replied to Cranston as well, “‘Only sociopaths with no sense of empathy...’ then soon afterwards [Cranston wrote] ‘I respect your own decision...’ ? This is yet another name calling example towards fellow members who might differ & vote NO ... just like ‘Low-Level’, ‘trolls’, ‘naysayers’, etc. Such divisiveness is uncalled for.”

Actress Leila Charles Leigh added, “We’re being pressured by our union leaders to vote for our own demise. Hard pass.”

Author Keala Kelly pointed out, “Disney owns ABC, and the network ordered the news division not to use the word genocide when talking about Palestine. The film/tv industry is all about ending free speech and total domination of what is or isn’t an important story & whose lives matter. This AI contract is evil.”

Juliet Landau, daughter of Barbara Bain and Martin Landau, issued an annotated version of the contract, making a number of salient criticisms. She summarized her views by arguing, “Attached are the facts, which we see as irrefutable, and lead us to a NO vote after reading the 129-page draft (Not final contract) released by SAG/AFTRA.”

She first pointed out that the agreement finally distributed by SAG-AFTRA “is a draft—not final—Who ever signed any legal document without final language??? We should have final language before execution (before the vote is due) like every legal doc. Would you buy a house, sign a house loan, sign your estate planning, sign any acting deal without final language?”

Landau observed that the tentative agreement’s stipulation that the studios obtain “consent” before digitally replicating a performer was meaningless when that consent was a condition of employment. “Consent within a contract for an offer of work is not consent,” she wrote. “It is coercive consent. If you want the job, you will have to sign.”

On the streaming payments and “success bonus,” Landau is one of the few to have exposed the scheme’s paltry character and the degree to which it is entirely geared to the needs of the companies and relies on their “trustworthiness.”

On the handful of series that might qualify for the “success bonus,” the tentative agreement’s scheme provides that 20 percent of the subscriber base must view the series within 90 days. The actress asked, “Why are we limited to the first 90 days? Why are we not entitled to share in the profits for the duration of the time on the platform / for every view?”

Moreover, the contract provides that the “Union (and the Success Bonus Distribution Fund) shall not be entitled to obtain information about the number of domestic subscribers, the hours streamed domestically, the running time or the ‘success metric’ of the High Budget SOD [Stream on Demand] Program.” Landau went on, “How will we ever be paid if there is no accountability/accurate accounting?”

Incredibly, as Landau remarks, the contract goes on to include this gem: “Because of the particularly sensitive nature of the Confidential Viewership Information, the Union agrees to grant access to the Confidential Viewership Information only to a limited number of individuals whose access to the Confidential Viewership Information is essential for the Union’s use of this information, but not to exceed six (6) in number.” Landau asked, “Again, why no transparency? Why is it confidential? Why the need for this info to be given to only 6 people in the union. Who will those 6 people be?” It is necessary to point out once again that “business secrets” are only “secret” to actors and other workers. Industry executives, including rivals, are fully informed about such “confidential”

statistics.

Landau concluded, “SAG/AFTRA says to trust them. They know what is best for us but I trust facts.”

Several nervous articles have appeared in the media taking note of the widespread opposition that exists among actors to the tentative agreement. *The Wrap* carried a piece November 30 headlined, “SAG-AFTRA Votes: Contract Unlikely To Win by Huge Margin,” which remarked that “it has become clear that the actors guild’s members will not overwhelmingly vote in favor of the contract—largely because of lingering concerns over AI protections.” The essential purpose of the article, however, was to soothe concerns and suggest, in any event, that SAG-AFTRA can do nothing about the technological onslaught.

Cynically and unsurprisingly, *Variety* recently ran an article with a headline announcing, “AI Companies Praise SAG-AFTRA and WGA Contracts: ‘They’ve Done a Great Job.’” In other words, firms that have their eye on coining billions of dollars at the expense of actors, writers, stunt workers, voice performers, background actors, production assistants and all those whose jobs depend on such professions, are full of praise of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA contracts. If that isn’t proof of their sellout character, what is?”

Variety praises the WGA and SAG-AFTRA for their reasonableness: “Both guilds obtained job protections against AI abuse, including consent and protection against diminishment of pay. But their agreements also allow the use of AI tools both in screenwriting and in the creation of performances.”

The unions are opening the doors to mass job destruction and the further impoverishment of working class actors.

The WSWS fights for an opposed perspective: rejection of this rotten contract, the building of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees that will take the leadership of a renewed strike away from the traitors in SAG-AFTRA. Actors must demand: a 25 percent increase in the first year of the contract; a ban on digital replicas in the hands of the conglomerates; open the books—pay serious residuals, retroactively and in the future, for what film artists create.



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