

SAG-AFTRA contract ratified, with a large abstention

David Walsh
6 December 2023

The tentative agreement between the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) has been ratified. Some 78.3 percent of ballots cast by SAG-AFTRA members were cast in favor of the agreement and 21.7 percent in opposition.

The turnout of the union membership was 38 percent. In other words, some 29 percent of SAG-AFTRA members actually voted to support the agreement.

The entertainment media hastened to explain that this turnout was as large or larger than other votes on recent SAG-AFTRA contracts. Yes, except this one took place in the aftermath of a 118-day strike, considerable controversy in particular over the Artificial Intelligence (AI) issue and widespread publicity about opposition. If the membership had been enthusiastic about the results, it would have indicated that with a resounding endorsement. When only a little more than a third of the membership bothers to vote in such circumstances, this has to be considered a vote of non-confidence in the union leadership.

The comment of SAG-AFTRA member and background actor Honey Brennan to *Rolling Stone* probably typified the sentiments of many who voted for the agreement or cast no ballot at all. Brennan explained, according to the publication, that she found the agreement “largely disappointing.” Despite that, she planned to vote for it: “I probably have no choice,” Brennan told *Rolling Stone*. “I want to go back to work and I don’t think they’re going to do anything for us anyway. If I vote no, what’s going to happen? You go out on strike again? I doubt it.”

This is the goal toward which SAG-AFTRA and other unions today largely exert themselves when they are obliged to call a strike: wearing down their

members’ powers of resistance and demoralizing them to the point where they will accept whatever the company offers.

Union executive director and chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland made it clear at meeting after meeting that the SAG-AFTRA officialdom had no appetite for a struggle of any kind even if the agreement were defeated. *Variety* reported in mid-November that the union’s head was warning actors that rejecting the deal “would not automatically mean the union would go back on strike. The union would have to return to the bargaining table without a guarantee that the current terms would remain in place, Crabtree-Ireland said.” In other words, he was suggesting that further resistance would only make matters worse!

Crabtree-Ireland went on, in the same vein, “We’d have to evaluate what the likely success is of going back and reinstating a strike ... From my point of view, we gained the maximum amount of leverage and we reached a deal right at our point of peak leverage in this process.” He added: “Continuing the strike into the holiday period, in my view, would not have resulted in additional leverage. It would have probably de-leveraged us for a variety of reasons. And I do not believe we would have been able to gain additional gains in this contract by staying on strike longer.”

This statement manages to combine blackmail with abject cowardice. It is understandable why many SAG-AFTRA members felt compelled to vote for the agreement. With such a bankrupt leadership at their head, what prospects were there for coming out victorious?

This underscores the need for actors to build rank-and-file committees to take matters out of the hands of this leadership, which is little more than an extension of management.

Predictably, SAG-AFTRA officials like Crabtree-Ireland, with his million-dollar salary, and Fran Drescher, also a millionaire, engaged in an orgy of self-congratulation.

Drescher kept up her practice of uttering inappropriate and empty-headed remarks, declaring that “This is a golden age for SAG-AFTRA, and our union has never been more powerful.” This is an organization, in fact, that has just agreed to the evisceration of its own membership through AI and, for the most part, its further impoverishment.

Crabtree-Ireland argued that SAG-AFTRA members had demanded, among other things, “a fundamental change in the way this industry treats them: fairness in compensation for their labor, protection from abusive use of AI technology.” He claimed that the “new contract delivers on these objectives and makes substantial progress in moving the industry in the right direction.”

It does no such thing, as any honest observer would have no difficulty in proving.

The increase in minimum wage rates of 14.5 percent over three years doesn’t begin to make up for what performers have lost to concessions contracts in the past and surging inflation over the last three years in particular. An estimated 80 percent of actors, the vast majority of them living in the most expensive cities in the US, earn less than \$26,000 a year, while 90 percent are unemployed at any given time.

The “protection” on AI is no protection at all. It gives the green light to the conglomerates to destroy jobs and entire professions. It codifies the right of the companies to insist that actors “consent” to digital replicas of themselves as a condition of employment—i.e., “consent” given under duress, for struggling actors.

The streaming residuals “bonus scheme” would have a farcical aspect to it, if it weren’t so disastrous. The conglomerates are not obliged to pay a penny more in compensation for more than a decade of streaming, from which they have derived *billions* while paying out literally *pennies*.

Going forward, actors on a handful of series will derive a bonus if 20 percent of a given streaming platform’s subscribers watch it within 90 days. On this issue, SAG-AFTRA surrendered all down the line, reducing its demand from what it claimed was a \$500 million share of streaming revenue to the miserable \$40

million bonus plan, i.e., by more than 90 percent. The \$40 million, to be distributed among hundreds or thousands of actors, is less than numerous Hollywood executives make individually in a single year.

The SAG-AFTRA deal is thoroughly rotten, a shameless betrayal, and many performers already understand that. Over the coming period, many more will come to understand it. Background actors, voice actors, stunt performers fully expect to have many of their jobs wiped out, without the union lifting a finger.

The AMPTP, representing billion-dollar firms such as Disney, Netflix, Warner Bros. Discovery, Amazon, Apple, Paramount Pictures, NBCUniversal and the rest of the corporate thieves, has understandably been laying low. They couldn’t help but crow about the results of the contract negotiations: “The AMPTP member companies congratulate SAG-AFTRA on the ratification of its new contract, which represents historic gains and protections for performers. With this vote, the industry and the jobs it supports will be able to return in full force.”

If this statement were rendered into honest English it might go something like this: “Congratulations to SAG-AFTRA officials for successfully lying about and ‘selling’ this deal, which represents historic gains and protections for the AMPTP member companies and their obscenely rich executives. With this vote, actors, writers and other film industry can get back to the business of generating profits for us.”



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