

IATSE workers prepare to fight as union signals another contract betrayal is in the works

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Unions bargaining for tens of thousands of below-the-line workers in the entertainment industry began contract negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers (AMPTP) on March 4, five months ahead of the July 31 expiration of the current contract. The talks started on the same day that *Deadline* sources revealed that the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) “already had preliminary talks with the Carol Lombardini-led AMPTP last month.”

This was the first and only mention by the Hollywood press, the AMPTP or the unions about these secret meetings held a month in advance of official negotiations. The union has not revealed what was discussed, or, for that matter, acknowledged that talks even took place.

The negotiations that began last Monday marked the first time since 1988 that IATSE and the Hollywood Basic Crafts (which includes Teamsters Local 399, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 40 (IBEW), Laborers International Union of North America (LiUNA!) Local 724, United Association Plumbers (UA) Local 78 and the Operating Plasterers & Cement Masons International Association (OPCMIA) Local 755), have bargained jointly with the AMPTP. The vast bulk of these workers belong to IATSE.

The unions spent last week presenting their proposals to management. This week the parties are meeting among themselves, with general negotiations resuming March 18.

Below-the-line workers are members of the production team, as opposed to the writers, directors, actors and producers (“above-the-line”). The term covers a host of professionals, including film editors, cinematographers, make-up and hair artists, set decorators, gaffers, production assistants, lighting technicians, key grips, sound engineers and others.

The workers have every right to begin this round of negotiations with the greatest distrust and suspicion of the IATSE and other union bureaucracies, notorious for their history of class collaboration, anti-communist witch-hunting and treachery. Nothing else should be expected of them this time, and workers had better take steps now to avoid a sellout, especially under conditions of economic contraction and

massive job- and cost-cutting in the film and television industry.

In 2021 workers went through a bitter experience when IATSE called off an impending strike and dubbed the rotten deal it agreed with AMPTP a “Hollywood Ending.” Many workers were angry that the agreement did not significantly increase turnarounds between shifts or guarantee lunch breaks, left dangerous conditions on set in place, did not grant rights to streaming revenues, and left pay increases well *below* the rate of inflation.

Film industry workers need to draw some lessons from that episode. IATSE officials said last week they presented the AMPTP with their initial proposals related to the health and pension plans, but received no response or counter-proposal. On the following days, they presented proposals to “enhance contract enforcement, economic proposals to offset or exceed increased cost of living, and working conditions proposals that extend reasonable rest and drastically increase penalties on employers for overworking,” as well as “focusing on the union’s comprehensive package of proposals to address emerging technologies, including but not limited to Artificial Intelligence.”

Nothing has changed since 2021. These proposals are not being made public in any detail, yet they will determine the future of thousands of workers. IATSE President Matthew Loeb has pledged time and again that the negotiations would be transparent, and that the union would keep members informed about the negotiations. However, this is yet another in a long series of broken promises and falsehoods, one of the most remarkable of which was the claim about a “Hollywood ending” at the signing of the last contract three years ago.

In an effort to conceal the secrecy of the current proposals, IATSE International Vice President Mike Miller declared that in “the coming weeks, we will continue to discuss the specifics of these proposals and provide periodic updates on our exchanges.”

Workers are supposed to wait weeks after the proposals are made to know what the union is actually negotiating, and then settling for.

In fact, all the negotiations should be live-streamed. Not allowing workers to know what the exact proposals are will only help disguise climb-downs such as the shift during negotiations last time from 12-hour turnarounds to 10-hour turnarounds, which enraged workers. As the WSWS pointed out at the time, “What worker is due a 14-hour shift even once, much less on a regular basis? The union has demonstrably caved on one of the central demands, within hours of returning to the negotiating table from a position of strength, without bothering to offer an explanation to the membership.”

The secrecy will also allow Loeb to present any tentative agreement once again as another “landmark” win for the union, when in fact, given the nature of the union officialdom, it can only be another rotten contract. The rank-and-file must intervene now.

Loeb, whose compensation package for 2023 was a whopping \$563,529, has concerns that are far different from those he is supposed to represent. He doesn’t have to worry about not sleeping because he must regularly work shifts longer than 12 hours a day, and sometimes as long as 20 hours. Such shifts are possible under the terms of the last contract, which did not put a cap on the length of a given shift, merely mandating there should be a ten-hour turnaround time between shifts.

Of course, this depends, in the first place, on the contract language being adhered to, in an industry presided over by pirates who rob writers, actors, directors and production crew members blind if they can get away with it.

One of the first of the union proposals involves efforts to “enhance contract enforcement.” What this means, as every industry worker knows, is that often the contract is not worth the paper it is written on, because management does not abide by it and the union does nothing to enforce it. The fact that minimal “enforcement” should be even a major issue after decades of union “representation” in the industry is extremely telling.

Loeb has been busy in the lead-up to negotiations, aside from carrying on secret talks with management without informing the membership (much like the SAG-AFTRA and Replica agreement). Loeb gave an interview to *Variety* last weekend, as well as speaking at a rally with Teamsters head Sean O’Brien to launch the negotiations. In all these contexts, Loeb has signaled IATSE’s intent to betray yet another struggle of below-the-line workers.

In the *Variety* interview, for example, he begins the climb-down on enforcement regarding turnaround times when he states, “We’re not after the penalties and the dollars—we’re about giving rest to people.” How that is supposed to happen without penalties, or language to that effect in the contract, he does not spell out. The only thing he does spell out, along with O’Brien, is a constant regurgitation of the mantra that workers are ready to fight despite being off work for much of last year due to the strike of the actors and writers.

The issue is not the resolve of workers, as Loeb and O’Brien

know all too well, for the rank and file have demonstrated time and again their willingness to fight for a better life, for safety in the workplace, for 12-hour turnaround times, for breaks, for a chance to have a life. It is Loeb, the bureaucratic apparatus at IATSE and the other unions who work to hinder this at every opportunity through a strategy of divide, isolate and demoralize.

The misnamed Caucus of Rank-and-File Entertainment Workers, which sprang up overnight last November under the auspices of Labor Notes and the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA), is intervening in this struggle to sow confusion and prop up the union hierarchy. The fact that the leaders of this “rank-and-file” group promote both Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU, which supported O’Brien), and the UAW-D and Shawn Fain should be a warning to film and television workers.

Fain conducted a scabbing operation on the UAW membership last year by keeping over 80 percent of auto workers on the job during a so-called strike. The result of the UAW’s “historic” contract is the widespread destruction of jobs and continuing deterioration in conditions. As for O’Brien, who likes to shake his fist before he sells out, he is now romancing fascist Donald Trump. Putting the demagoguery aside and looking at his actual record, O’Brien helped negotiate a filthy deal for UPS workers last summer.

The way forward for entertainment workers is to make a clear break with the bureaucratic apparatus and the two parties of big business.

This can only be done by forming democratically controlled rank-and-file committees independent of the union officialdom. The immediate aim should be to formulate concrete demands, based on what workers genuinely need and not on what the corporations say they can afford, and a political-industrial strategy to win them.



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