

Reject IATSE sellout contract—Organize rank-and-file committees!

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Entertainment workers in the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) will be voting between July 14 and 17 on a tentative agreement (TA) reached between the union and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

After signing off on a TA June 25 for the Basic Agreement (BA), which covers 50,000 below-the-line entertainment workers primarily in the Los Angeles area, the union brought back an apparently identical agreement two days later for the Area Standards Agreement (ASA), which covers production work by 20,000 IATSE members in the US outside the major cities.

The two Memorandums of Agreement were released July 10 on IATSE websites, only four days before workers were scheduled to begin voting on the deals.

There have been local town halls at which not much has been revealed, according to reports from workers. IATSE officials have scheduled a multi-local online meeting to take place July 14, the first day of voting. The hope of the employers, media and union leaders is that workers can be stampeded into voting for the agreement before they have time to seriously evaluate its content and implications.

This is entirely in line with the history and character of the IATSE bureaucracy, which rammed through the last agreement in 2021 despite its being voted down by a majority of the membership. It was only the anti-democratic electoral college-like system used by the union that made possible the passage of the TA and a strike's avoidance.

As the WSWS has pointed out before, IATSE, which has never called a national strike in its history, is not an instrument of struggle. It is an organization dedicated to suppressing rank-and-file sentiment and implementing the plans of the studios and networks, while maintaining the exorbitant earnings of its executives.

Over the course of the last week, the Hollywood trade papers have been hyping the TA, especially provisions on artificial intelligence (AI), with *Variety* being somewhat more circumspect, terming the provisions concerning AI as “vague.”

However, “vague” does not even hint at the reality. There is in fact nothing binding in the AI provisions as outlined in the summary.

The TA stipulates that if “an Employee uses their own AI System, the Producer and employee shall negotiate a kit rental fee.” This forces each individual worker to bargain separately with management over what is essentially wages, weakening his or her

position and, in practice, allowing management to dictate terms.

It goes on to explain that a committee “will be formed to develop work training programs that can provide skills training in the use of AI systems.” This does not specify who is to make up the committee, whether the programs developed will be mandatory, or anything else for that matter.

The next section states an “employee shall not be required to provide prompts in any manner that results in the displacement of any covered employee.” As we previously noted, the word “required” simply means that workers will be *given the opportunity* to accede to company demands concerning AI. If they refuse, as with writers and actors, they will likely find themselves unemployable.

Moreover, this is a formula that allows AI to be integrated into what are termed ultra-low budget films, in which many of the crew are not “covered” employees, and work in some cases alongside IATSE members.

Other provisions allow employees to “request a consultation” regarding AI, establish “quarterly meetings when requested by the Union to address issues in a timely manner,” etc. This is all verbiage binding the employers to nothing. Anyone over the age of 10 in Hollywood understands this is a written invitation for further abuse and exploitation.

An additional section states that any “request to scan an employee must be clear and conspicuous through a separately signed statement or writing. Consent to scanning cannot be made a condition of employment.” Why would there ever be a need to scan below-the-line entertainment workers unless their images and voices are to be used to replace above-the-line employees in the entertainment industry? There should be a complete ban on the scanning of below-the-line employees for AI use.

The last section on AI provides that language will be added later mandating management to negotiate with the union “over any impact the use of AI Systems may have upon employees.” Again, this is simply a request to be pushed around, lied to and cheated.

Before negotiations began, IATSE international President Matthew Loeb, who collected \$563,529 in pay last year, said in reference to AI, “Sometimes new jobs are created with new technology. My hope is that some of the efficiencies and/or advantages of AI will filter down to the crews.” Loeb’s hopes and prayers will find no fulfillment in the real existing world, which he knows perfectly well.

The TA reached behind closed doors with management does not

provide any relief from the brutal hours, something out of the mid-19th century, currently imposed on film and television workers. (In passing, in a recent *New Yorker* interviewer, writer-director Lena Dunham praised conditions in England, where she is currently working, because working days “are ten hours, whereas days in the U.S. can just stretch into infinity.”) Twelve-, 14- and 16-hour days will not go away without a struggle. The new deal gives management the go-ahead to run roughshod over the health, safety and lives of entertainment workers.

The TA’s supposedly tempting wage increase of 14.5 percent over three years, when examined critically, amounts to a pittance. Los Angeles, for example, experienced an official 11 percent increase in the cost of living from 2021 to 2024, already negating the 9 percent wage increase included in the last three-year contract.

IATSE members work and live (if they can) in some of the most expensive urban centers in the US and the world. According to Zillow, the cost of a home in Los Angeles “went up by 9.3% in March 2024 compared to the same time last year.”

California’s Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) reports that monthly payments in the state “for a newly purchased mid-tier home—including mortgage, taxes, and homeowner’s insurance—have increased dramatically over the last couple of years.”

The LAO points out that since January 2020, “California housing costs ... have grown more than California wages. ... From January 2020 to March 2024, the growth in monthly payments for a mid-tier home (80 percent) and bottom-tier home (86 percent) have far exceeded growth in average hourly wages (18 percent).”

Meanwhile, the destruction of jobs and futures carries on apace in the film and television industry. According to ProdPro, in a report featured prominently in the *Los Angeles Times*, “lower volumes” of film and television production “are here to stay.” Comparing the number of productions “that started principal photography in Q2 2024 to those in 2022, the US saw a decrease of approximately 40%, while globally there was a ~20% decrease.” (Emphasis added.)

This has come about entirely because of the crisis of the profit-run entertainment field—the streaming crunch, higher interest rates, the demands of Wall Street, the declining ability of families to afford Hollywood’s expensive products and other trends. Has there been a 40 percent drop in popular interest in films and series? Or a 40 percent decrease in the need for film and television productions that say and mean something?

There are prominent and notable exceptions, but much of what the film and television industry turns out is rubbish, a reality that a series of spectacular box office failures has brought home. We live at a time of turbulent and traumatic world and national events. How much of that finds reflection on large and small screens? There is widespread opposition to the Israeli mass murder in Gaza, but Hollywood’s upper echelons have dedicated themselves to suppressing that opposition. There is mass hostility to going to war against nuclear-armed Russia and China, but the Biden White House, to whom the film and television conglomerates are tied by a thousand strings, is pushing ahead with its reckless plans.

The studios (and the Biden administration behind them), the entertainment media and IATSE and the other unions are all

campaigning for passage of the IATSE deal. They all want “labor peace.”

Biden and the Democrats seek “labor peace” for economic and political reasons. They do not want film and television workers to show the way in fighting the big companies, to smash through the miserable wage ceiling, among other things. They also want Hollywood “stable” and secure, and ideologically lined up behind their war drive.

The giant companies, seconded by their media toadies, desire “labor peace” so they can continue raking in profits and their executives drawing fantastic salaries. The 10 most highly paid Hollywood executives alone made more than \$2 billion from 2018 to 2022.

IATSE leaders and the other union officialdoms are desperate for “labor peace” to maintain their own privileged positions, cement their relations with the corporations and the Biden administration, and prevent the rank and file from “disrupting” corporate business as usual.

Class-conscious workers want what is needed by the working class, regardless of what the companies claim they can afford, in terms of wages, conditions, job safety, hours and Artificial Intelligence.

IATSE officials are hardly making an attempt to sell this contract to workers, comfortable that after two strikes that held up work for most of last year, coupled with the “Great Hollywood Contraction,” workers will be cowed into voting for almost any agreement to continue working or hoping they can find work.

The only thing that this contract will ensure is a further lowering of the living conditions of entertainment workers. Grueling shifts, for low pay, no breaks or time for family, while leaving all decisions on work firmly in the hands of management. That is why we call for a no vote and for all entertainment workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucrats through the creation of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees independent of the two big business parties, as well as the union bureaucracies. Only in this way can the struggle for better conditions of existence be taken forward.



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