

IATSE members ratify tentative agreements, big struggles lie ahead

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Entertainment workers, members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), have ratified both the Basic Agreement and the Area Standards Agreement by wide margins, according to the union. The voting took place July 14 to 17. The two three-year agreements cover some 70,000 workers.

Although the contract was set to expire July 31, IATSE officials did not even bother to organize a strike authorization vote. The union has never held a national strike in its history.

IATSE and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which represents the studios and networks in contract bargaining, were both determined to reach an agreement in line with the companies' profit needs and every aspect of the negotiation process was choreographed with that end in mind.

The union leadership, seconded loudly by the media, claims the 14.5 percent wage increase over three years is a great victory. In fact, the increase doesn't begin to make up for what has been lost this decade through increases in the cost of living.

Since 2020, prices for goods and services in California, where many IATSE members reside, have risen some 20 percent overall. Many items necessary for workers are increasing at far faster rates in the state than that. Auto insurance premiums, for example, rose 17.7 percent from 2023 to 2024 alone. Meanwhile, rent in California is 38 percent higher than the national median. The median sale price of a home in Los Angeles was \$1.1 million in June, up 11.8 percent in a year. The wage hike will evaporate in a welter of increases for rent, mortgage, food, utilities and insurance.

On Artificial Intelligence (AI), along with the writers and actors unions, IATSE members gained essentially nothing. The companies are fiercely resolved to slash costs and cut the workforce, and the union bureaucracies simply gave way.

Variety diplomatically asserts that "IATSE also won certain concessions around the use of AI. Any AI use will be covered by the union contract, and no member will be forced to enter prompts into an AI system that put another member out of work." The contracts, the publication continued, "also provide that if a member loses their job due to AI, they are entitled to severance and retraining. The contract also provides for regular meetings to discuss developments in the technology."

All this is dust thrown in the workers' eyes. No one will be "forced" to do anything unless he or she actually wants to go on working in the industry. Anyone who puts up resistance to the companies' plans will find him or herself ostracized or worse. "Regular meetings" will be held between billion-dollar conglomerates and unions that have already capitulated. The results of those meetings are predictable.

Many IATSE members expressed concern about the AI question, in social media and other venues. "Members pressed IATSE leadership," *Variety* writes, "for more information about the terms during a Town Hall meeting held on Saturday."

The agreement was so poor that the Set Designers and Model Makers (SDMM) Council, a division of the Art Directors Guild (IATSE-Local 800), put out a statement July 13 calling for a no vote on the tentative agreement. The SDMM Council asserted that in

the new contract language, we have not been given any protections relating to our individual processes when designing, building models, illustrating or creating documents. This applies to all crafts. Art direction, set design, illustration, graphic arts and in some cases physical model making if using a computer to create parts.

The statement added that it was

the consensus of this committee that the AI language in the proposed contract allows our combined crafts within Local 800 to be put at direct risk of an emerging technology not designed to enhance creativity but instead to learn from and ultimately replace us. VOTE NO AND DEMAND ADEQUATE PROTECTIONS!

Indiewire reports as well that

Illustrators and matte artists within the Art Directors Guild Local 800 have issued an open letter recommending guild members vote against IATSE's tentative deal with the studio in the ongoing ratification vote. The group is specifically opposed to the language in the deal surrounding "AI Systems."

There are numerous professions and crafts that the studios devoutly hope will be entirely or largely wiped out by technological advances.

IATSE officials have no convincing answers to any of this because they are aware of these plans and fully accept them.

Inevitably, IATSE International President Matthew Loeb, who collects half a million dollars or more in compensation, boasted that the union's "rank-and-file members have spoken, and their will is clear."

This is not true. The large "yes" vote is a product of various processes. IATSE members no doubt considered the long, painful strikes by actors and writers last year, with the meager results they produced, and weighed the alternatives. A strike with a leadership unwilling and unable to fight, a strike that might produce in the end a contract little better than the one they were currently being offered?

Many no doubt felt an economic gun at their heads. One bleak industry news report follows another. The "Hollywood contraction" dominates the local and trade media. The *Los Angeles Times* in mid-June headlined one piece, "Why Hollywood jobs haven't come back, in three charts." It commented, "Hollywood is in trouble. As if the pandemic, streaming wars and twin strikes weren't enough to shake the industry's finances, new box office data paint an even grimmer picture."

The article cited the comments of Jonathan Kuntz, a film historian at UCLA: "The very basis of what made Hollywood universally popular in the 20th century was the theatrical feature film. That seems to be ending now ... It seems the audience has moved on." The *Times* continued, "Employment in L.A. County's entertainment industry has reached its lowest level in more than three decades, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics."

Two weeks later, the newspaper carried another grim headline, "Goodbye, Hollywood: Why these film and TV workers decided to ditch L.A."

"Some industry workers," this article asserted, "continue to cling on to the limited opportunities left in Hollywood. But many others—unwilling to endure expensive rents, mortgages and living costs as well as the uncertainty of how artificial intelligence will affect their jobs—have left Los Angeles for places such as Atlanta, Colorado and New Mexico."

In July, technology and research company ProdPro reported that the number of global film and television productions in 2024 was down 20 percent from 2022. In the US, the decline

was a staggering 40 percent. Moreover, ProdPro added, "The lower volumes are here to stay."

FilmLA reported this week that filming in Los Angeles fell 12.4 percent overall in the second quarter of 2024 from the same period a year earlier. Feature film production declined 3.3 percent and commercial production fell 5.1 percent. However, as FilmLA comments, these decreases "both looked minor when compared to a steep plunge in unscripted television production," i.e., Reality TV, where production fell 57 percent, "taking the broader Television category ... lower with it," by some 28 percent.

In the aftermath of the ratification vote results being announced, the giant conglomerates, through their vehicle, the AMPTP, praised Loeb and the IATSE officialdom. "From the first day of negotiations," gloated the AMPTP, "IATSE leadership demonstrated a clear commitment to a fair and collaborative process, which resulted in agreements that contain historic gains and protections, reflect the immense value that IATSE members bring to production, and ensure our industry will continue to deliver well-paid jobs and exciting content for years to come."

The union leadership certainly deserves these plaudits from entertainment workers' dedicated, predatory enemies. Loeb and company carried out their assignment, to string along the membership and keep it in the dark as long as possible, stifle its best instincts, bamboozle to the degree they could, and generally demobilize, dissipate and neutralize rank-and-file anger and opposition.

But this is hardly the final word. The entertainment industry faces economic, political and cultural upheavals in the coming period. In reality, it is already in the midst of them. The critical question is the development of a class-conscious, socialist section of workers, dedicated to breaking the stranglehold of the massive, ruthless, conglomerate-parasites. This will develop through the construction of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatuses, taking up every issue critical to the lives and interests of the workers (actors, writers, directors, crew members) who produce everything of value in film and television.



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