

SAG-AFTRA negotiations begin: What are the issues facing actors and other industry workers?

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Negotiations between the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) began February 9.

The conditions today are even more tense and fraught than those that led to a 118-day strike in 2023. Tens of thousands have lost their jobs in the “Great Hollywood Contraction,” with technologies and mergers threatening tens of thousands more. Entire crafts and professions face elimination.

American society as a whole faces unprecedented circumstances, as the Trump administration, assisted by the Democrats, is building a police-state dictatorship that will shoot protesters down on the streets and launch criminal wars against any perceived enemies.

SAG-AFTRA and its new president Sean Astin talk and act as if it were “business as usual,” leaving actors and other union members entirely unprepared and disoriented. This is a recipe for disaster. The conglomerates have their ruthless plans worked out, but actors and film and television workers are left in the dark by a well-heeled, complacent union bureaucracy.

The SAG-AFTRA leadership ominously announced on February 7 that negotiations would be held behind closed doors with complete media silence. The current contract is set to expire on June 30. Nothing good for actors and performers can come out of such behind-closed-doors negotiations between the conglomerates and union officials. The first demand of actors should be that the talks be held in public. Enough of secret negotiations!

The SAG-AFTRA National Board and Astin also insisted that they had “unanimously approved a TV/Theatrical/Streaming negotiations package during its scheduled one-day video plenary today.” The union leadership asserts the “negotiations package” was “shaped with member input from across the country through SAG-AFTRA’s wages and working conditions process, which gathered feedback on the issues and priorities that matter most to members working under the TV/Theatrical/Streaming contracts.” The board immediately followed up with the statement that the “proposals within the negotiations package are confidential and are not released.”

If the negotiations package was really the result of members’ needs and concerns, and the National Board voted unanimously to approve the package, why then the need for secrecy? They are certainly not keeping their package secret from the AMPTP, and the media will ferret out whatever it wants to know, so it is only the SAG-AFTRA membership that will be kept clueless as to what exactly is being negotiated—or given away—in their name.

The union leadership hailed the previous contract, signed after a 118-day strike as “historic.” Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, SAG-AFTRA’s national executive director and chief negotiator, who takes home \$1.02 million each year, argued that members wanted “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.”

In fact, conditions for wide layers of performers have only deteriorated since 2023.

Only 14 percent of SAG-AFTRA members are eligible for benefits, a drop of nearly 10 percent from the period before the last contract negotiation. Currently, 90 percent of actors are unemployed at any given time and only 12.08 percent of SAG-AFTRA members earn more than \$1,000 annually from performance work, while the cost of living in Los Angeles is approximately 49.7 percent higher than the national average.

Since the ratification of the last contract (with only 38 percent of the membership voting), there has been a jobs bloodbath in the industry. Nothing in the “historic” contract or the union leaders’ actions have slowed this contraction down in the slightest.

The “informed consent” clauses in the 2023 contract did nothing to prevent the destruction of jobs through the further integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the Hollywood production process.

The latest report from FilmLA—the official film office for the City and County of Los Angeles—revealed that the number of shoot days (SD) for 2025 stood at 19,694, a decline of 16.9

percent from 2024. With the Feature Film category sinking 19.7 percent in the fourth quarter year over year and 31.7 percent below the five-year average for this category.

Television saw a decline in SD of 21.9 percent from the fourth quarter results of 2024. FilmLA reports, “The TV Reality category finished down -9.8 percent last quarter compared to the same quarter the year prior with 698 SD, bringing it down -49.7 percent for the five-year average.” The Commercials category “was down -23.2 percent in Q4 versus the same period last year amounting to a decline of -35.3 percent over the five-year average.”

In fact, every category saw a decline save one, On-Location Production, which saw a rise of 5.6 percent in the fourth quarter over the previous year’s numbers.

These numbers are not an aberration. 2025 was the fourth straight year of declining SD. The Great Hollywood Contraction has seen the ranks of artists and all those working in the film and television industry be devastated. Many have left the industry.

Instead of preparing workers for a major struggle against the conglomerates, the response of SAG-AFTRA to the continued loss of jobs has been to either pit workers in California against workers in other regions (#StayInLA), or to team up with management to beg for incentives and subsidies from the state. These funds only line the pockets of management, while doing nothing to stifle the wholesale destruction of jobs.

The release earlier in February of ByteDance’s Seedance 2.0 is a glaring demonstration of the existential crisis that artists face in the next few years, as AI continues to develop and becomes fully integrated into the production process, while protections for artists are either non-existent or lag behind. The new technology allows companies to create completely synthetic performers that are unrecognizable from existing artists.

The union claims the current negotiations will build upon the protections and benefits won in the last round of negotiations. Given that the “informed consent” language was the totality of the protections, language which essentially leaves the individual worker to negotiate alone with management, there is no foundation to build upon.

Astin has said he will not focus on any one issue over another, though union leadership has signaled that health benefits will be the biggest priority. The goal as stated by the union is to increase the amount that is paid into the health fund, not increase the 14 percent of members currently eligible.

Only the intervention of the rank-and-file can turn the situation around. Actors only went on strike three years ago because artists, sensing a betrayal was in the works, sent a last-minute open letter to the union tops denouncing their plans.

As the WSWS said at the time: “The actors’ letter warns the union not to surrender and expresses a determination to fight the corporations without compromise. A strike, they write, brings hardships to many, ‘but we are prepared to strike if it

comes to that.’ In unusually stern language, the signatories insist this ‘is not a moment to meet in the middle.’”

Certain realities have to become more widely understood. The interests of actors and other film and television industry workers stand in direct opposition to those of the giant conglomerates. The plan of the latter is to slash jobs and eviscerate benefits in the interests of corporate profits.

The companies, with Trump behind them, will do everything in their power to impose the full burden of the current crisis on the backs of actors and film and television workers. SAG-AFTRA, the Writers Guild (whose own staff is on strike at present!), Teamsters, IATSE and the other union officialdoms will facilitate the corporations’ agenda. They act as an extension of management.

Moreover, the fate of Hollywood film and television is not merely a wages and benefits question. The popular cultural life of the US is now largely in the hands of reactionary oligarchs of the Ellison variety. For the economic and cultural good of the industry and the American people as a whole, this corporate chokehold has to be broken. Actors, writers and crew members will have to begin discussion on what future they would like to see for the powerful technologies. Under workers control, the sky would be the limit.

Artists should already see the warning signs and begin to create democratically controlled rank-and-file committees to take the leadership of the struggle out of the hands of the union leadership and place it into their own. It is only by doing this and linking the struggle of actors with that of other workers, such as the nurses currently on strike, teachers, dockworkers, autoworkers and service workers that progress will be made.

All of these different workers are facing similar conditions and challenges, and it is only through a joint, unified struggle that workers win anything.



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