

Vote NO on the SAG-AFTRA tentative agreement: Entertainment workers must join the broader struggle of the working class

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The SAG-AFTRA leadership has announced a tentative agreement (TA) with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), presenting it with the now-familiar rhetoric of “historic gains” and “foundational improvements.” Members are being urged to ratify the deal quickly, to embrace “stability” and to celebrate the deal as proof that the collective bargaining system works.

Artists should do none of these things. This agreement must be rejected with the largest “no” vote possible and independent rank-and-file committees must be formed immediately to ensure workers’ control and unity across industries.

After the 118-day strike of 2023—a strike that demonstrated the extraordinary willingness of performers to sacrifice for their livelihoods and their futures—the union’s National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland stated 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.”

It did nothing of the sort. Instead the entertainment industry entered the “Great Hollywood Recession,” which has seen production in Los Angeles and everywhere else implode. Shoot days in Los Angeles fell by 30 to over 50 percent from their five-year averages in virtually every measurable category of production. At the same time, the drive to integrate AI into the production pipeline has grown exponentially.

The financial oligarchy that owns the studios and the streaming conglomerates has never been richer. The same corporate oligarchs who plead poverty at the bargaining table flaunted their grotesque wealth at the 2026 Met Gala and similar soirées in Hollywood. The collective wealth of the top US billionaires, including Musk, Bezos and Ellison, increased by \$698 billion last year.

The ruling class’s contempt for workers, who are struggling with skyrocketing gas and food prices, was summed up by the fascist president in the White House. Asked whether he considered the impact of the US war against Iran on “Americans’ financial situations,” the gangster-president replied, “Not even a little bit.”

In the next few years there will be even greater demands for belt-tightening to fund the administration’s request for \$200 billion in supplemental funding for its criminal war against Iran and a \$1.5 trillion military budget for next year.

For the studio moguls and tech billionaires, AI is a way to eliminate actors, editors and other workers. In the hands of working people, however, this revolutionary technology could be used to sharply reduce work hours, exponentially increase living standards and encourage an explosion of creativity. A unified fight against mass layoffs and for the

collective ownership of these technologies would also demonstrate that the only ones who are inessential to society are the financial parasites who enrich themselves from the collective labor of working people whom they want to throw in the streets.

The rejection of this sellout deal and the launching of a strike would also have vast consequences for cultural development. As the WSWS raised during the 2023 strike:

Shutting down film and television production is a threat and a challenge to the corporate throttling of artistic freedom and creativity. Industry CEOs without an original thought in their heads preside for the most part over the production of a series of comic book fantasies and “action blockbusters,” one emptier and more miserable than the last. Writers and actors who crave doing serious, enduring work—significant examples of which have begun to emerge in recent years—can only look on in horror at the predominance of rubbish, and the deliberate effort by the studios and networks to turn audience members’ brains to mush. The strike movement of the writers and actors must encourage a turn to realism in film and television production, as artists are brought up against the harsh facts of contemporary social life.

It is in this context that the sellout deal brought back by the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy must be examined.

The four-year term

The single most significant concession in this agreement is one that will receive the least attention in the union’s marketing campaign: the four-year contract length. The industry standard has been three years. That difference is not trivial. The studios are in the middle of the most consequential technological and economic restructuring in the history of Hollywood. AI deployment is accelerating, streaming conglomerates are eliminating mid-budget productions, employment has collapsed since 2022 and the corporations are restructuring around permanently lower labor costs. The studios want labor peace precisely while completing this transition.

A four-year term gifts them exactly that. SAG-AFTRA will have effectively removed the strike threat during the very years in which AI replacement and industry restructuring are projected to reach their peak.

The bureaucracy calls this “stability.” Stability for whom? Certainly not for the tens of thousands of performers already facing a dramatically contracted labor market.

Wage cuts after inflation

The reported 3 percent annual increases, compounding to roughly 12.5 percent over four years, are being sold as meaningful progress. They are not. In Los Angeles and New York, these increases barely maintain purchasing power even for workers who remain consistently employed.

And that is precisely the problem: Vast sections of the SAG-AFTRA membership are not consistently employed. In fact, less than 12 percent of members make more than \$26,470 a year, the threshold to receive benefits, and this is a massive decline from before the 2023 contract. A marginally higher rate inside a dramatically smaller labor market is no victory at all. It is managed decline dressed in press-release language.

The “retirement-plan merger”

The merger of the SAG Pension Plan and AFTRA Retirement Fund is a calculated smokescreen for systematic benefit reduction. It mirrors the disastrous 2020 health plan overhaul, where “harmonized” eligibility rules stripped thousands of performers of their coverage. This consolidation raids the robust assets of the SAG plan to bail out AFTRA’s liabilities, diluting the security of veteran members. Trading permanent dual-vesting rights for a one-time, front-loaded cash infusion from the AMPTP is not a “modernization” strategy. It is a predatory fiscal band-aid that compromises the long-term retirement security of the entire membership for temporary labor peace.

Streaming

Streaming destroyed the residual system that once provided actors with stable income between jobs. While the tentative agreement claims streaming residual “improvements,” performers still lack access to independent viewership data or oversight of platform accounting. Netflix, Amazon and Disney retain full control over the numbers determining compensation, allowing them to manipulate payouts at will. SAG-AFTRA has again accepted this secrecy framework, repeating the pattern of the 2023 agreement, which promised “historic” gains while employment and earnings across the industry continued deteriorating.

The AI framework

The agreement is claimed to strengthen “guardrails” around digital replicas and synthetic performers. In reality, the core framework still permits digital replication of performers, AI-generated performances and synthetic performer usage under negotiated conditions, and direct individual bargaining between corporations and actors. This last point is critical and dangerous. Industry lawyers understood it clearly as far back

as 2023: Individual contracting frameworks create conditions under which performers can be pressured into signing away their rights as a condition of getting work at all. That danger will not be neutralized but institutionalized with this agreement.

The WGA pattern: a coordinated sellout

The SAG-AFTRA contract follows directly from the Writers Guild’s own deeply concessionary deal, which the WGA leadership announced suddenly in April without a strike authorization vote or full disclosure—a move the WSWS described as designed to block rank-and-file resistance before it could organize.

Both contracts normalize AI usage under regulated conditions rather than prohibiting its deployment against workers. Both accept opaque streaming-data structures controlled by the corporations. Both provide sub-inflation wage increases. Both extend labor peace during a period of massive technological restructuring. And both rely heavily on public relations language declaring “historic” results.

The pattern reflects a coordinated strategy by the union apparatuses to contain the anger that exploded in 2023 and deliver labor stability to the studios during the precise years of its deepest restructuring.

Entertainment workers are not alone

What the SAG-AFTRA leadership does not want performers to understand is that they are not isolated. They face the same enemy as every other section of the working class, and the solution requires breaking out of the isolation the union bureaucracy enforces.

The contract for 40,000 New York City subway and bus workers expires this Saturday, with a strike possible the same day for 3,500 Long Island Rail Road workers.

The key question is how workers can break through the straitjackets imposed on them by the pro-capitalist labor bureaucracy. The transit unions are joined at the hip with the Democratic Party and have even appealed to Trump in the recent past to block strike action.

Tens of thousands of UC service workers and healthcare technicians were set to strike Thursday, but the AFSCME union canceled it in the middle of the night. Rank-and-file autoworkers in the auto industry have voted NO repeatedly on sweatshop contracts, and the union bureaucracy worked against them at every turn.

The bureaucracy functions as a mechanism for containing opposition and delivering labor stability to management. They fear an uncontrolled rank-and-file confrontation as much as the studios do. That is why the SAG-AFTRA contract is so concessionary. What can be won will only be determined in struggle.

The way forward

The answer to this situation is the construction of independent rank-and-file committees that operate outside and against the union bureaucracy—democratically controlled by workers themselves, capable of coordinating with performers across the industry and reaching out in solidarity to transit workers, autoworkers, airline, healthcare and

education workers facing the same attacks.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has been built precisely to make this international coordination of workers a reality: a mass network that can serve as the foundation for a fight that unites workers on the basis of their common interests in opposition to the oligarchy.

The Hollywood worker facing AI replacement and the Detroit autoworker facing plant closure, the Long Island Rail Road worker, the University of California healthcare worker—They all face the same financial oligarchy, the same logic of profit over human need, the same system that funds wars abroad while impoverishing workers at home.

Vote NO. Build rank-and-file committees. Fight for the unity of the entire working class against the corporations, the union bureaucracies that serve them, and the capitalist system that produces both.



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