

Why the Hollywood unions actually “didn’t put up a fight” this year and what that means for entertainment workers

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On June 10, the *Hollywood Reporter* posted an article headlined “Why Hollywood’s Unions Didn’t Put Up a Fight With Studios This Year.” It’s a superficial piece, which accepts as good coin the explanations provided by the various parties involved.

In our view, the most accurate and direct response to the article’s headline would be: The Hollywood unions abjectly surrendered as they did in 2026 because they fully accept the existing economic conditions, including the stranglehold of the conglomerates, and act as extensions of management. They are incapable of developing a strategy independent of the corporate oligarchy, and this has disastrous consequences for industry workers.

But these issues need to be expanded upon and considered by writers, actors, crew members and others.

The *Hollywood Reporter*’s account of the 2026 contract cycle, which notes the Directors Guild of America (DGA) as “the last union to seal a deal,” paints a picture of a year remarkable mainly for its *absence* of drama. “What a difference three years makes,” the article begins. 2023 was “spicy.” 2026 was “sleepy.” The Writers Guild (WGA) talks were “very chill.” SAG-AFTRA’s negotiations were “pretty uneventful.” The DGA, true to form, behaved like the responsible eldest child.

The HR then proceeds to offer explanations for this supposed placidity: the ongoing contraction of Hollywood employment, the unions’ need for health plan funding, the “personalities at play” (a new AMPTP president, new union presidents) and the general sense that in a “precarious industry environment, unionized entertainment workers were in no position to risk another strike.”

The logic here deserves thinking about. Times are harsh, the employers are taking advantage by cutting jobs and increasing pressure on workers. Therefore ... the unions argue, we must run up the white flag!

What is to be said of organizations that capitulate without a fight in the face of ruthless enemies and bitter conditions? Workers might be able “tolerate” such unions in periods of relative peace and quiet, but now that everything is being turned upside down, the well-heeled union bureaucracies’ utter worthlessness from the point of view of struggle has been revealed. The rank and file will need to take matters into their own hands, or there will be nothing left.

Runaway production in Hollywood continues to accelerate. Major studios are aggressively relocating projects to the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Georgia and New York in pursuit of lower costs and higher subsidies. In Los Angeles, the capital of entertainment, Q1 2026 is down 3.3 percent year over year from Q1 2025, confirming

that local production remains in decline. This despite Governor Gavin Newsom’s much touted tax incentives which funnel public resources to corporations while failing to stem the loss of jobs.

The *Hollywood Reporter* article describes the genuinely dire situation:

An Otis College of Art and Design report in 2025 found that, between 2022 and 2025, entertainment jobs in L.A. fell by 25 percent. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that employment in the business has dropped 30 percent since late 2022.

(In the Great Depression, according to one source, “studios laid off more than 20 percent of their work force.”)

To the tens of thousands of writers, actors and crew members who have watched their livelihoods collapse over the past four years, the HR account will read as something between evasion and insult. As noted, it describes the surface of events—who said what, which leader replaced which, what percentage voted yes—while systematically obscuring the forces that determined the outcome. The purpose of this reply is not to polemicize against a trade publication but to speak directly to the workers who have been betrayed and to explain what actually happened, why it happened and what must be done.

The HR’s framing treats the absence of a strike as a neutral fact, perhaps even a welcome one. But the absence of a strike in 2026 was not the result of a genuine settlement that addressed workers’ needs. It was the result of a coordinated operation by the union apparatuses to prevent any possibility of a fight before the rank and file could organize one.

The WGA leadership announced a tentative agreement on April 4, a month before the May 1 contract expiration. They did not seek a strike authorization vote. They did not disclose the contract’s details before the WGA West Board and WGA East Council approved it. Only then were members permitted to vote, under conditions designed to limit discussion and suppress opposition. As the WSWS wrote at the time, this was “a preemptive capitulation designed to head off a broader confrontation between writers and the studios at a moment of escalating social and economic crisis.”

The SAG-AFTRA deal followed the same pattern. Both contracts run for four years instead of the traditional three, spacing out the threat of disruption. The studios wanted labor peace through 2030, the period during which AI-driven restructuring is projected to reach its

peak. The union bureaucracies delivered it.

The HR's article notes the four-year term almost in passing, as a curiosity. It does not ask what it means for a union to voluntarily disarm itself during the most consequential technological and economic restructuring in the history of Hollywood. "Stability," the article implies, is a reasonable thing to want. Stability for whom?

The *Hollywood Reporter* mentions, in a parenthetical, that "the most intense labor fight this year was not between the WGA and the studios but between the WGA and its own unionized workers." It then drops the subject entirely.

In February, 115 staff members at the Writers Guild of America West walked off the job, launching an unfair labor practices strike against the very organization that presents itself as the defender of writers against corporate exploitation. These workers, who administer residuals, enforce contracts, conduct research and coordinate communications, were demanding basic protections: just-cause termination safeguards, wages that approach a living standard in Los Angeles, and an end to retaliation against organizing. The minimum annual salary for WGAW staffers was \$43,000 in a city where a single adult needs approximately \$115,690 to live comfortably.

WGAW Executive Director Ellen Stutzman earns approximately \$682,692 annually. Assistant executive directors take home between \$399,000 and \$468,000. In 2023, the year of the last strike, then-Executive Director David Young received over \$1 million.

These union officials do not share the "precarious" conditions of the writers they claim to represent. They constitute a distinct social layer, a bureaucracy whose material interests, career prospects and social connections are bound up with the corporations and the Democratic Party, not with the rank and file.

The HR notes that more than 90 percent of participating WGA and SAG-AFTRA members approved their respective contracts. It presents this as evidence that the deals were sound.

The HR article and the self-congratulating union leaderships leave out one tiny detail. In October 2023, after a long struggle, 8,525 valid votes were cast in the WGA ratification balloting. This year? Only 4,738 WGA members voted, a decline of almost 45 percent. A loss of membership (thanks in part to the union's rotten deals), general disaffection, disgust? Or a combination of factors—but hardly a vote of confidence.

The same story in SAG-AFTRA. The union hasn't given out the actual vote totals, but in 2023, there was a turnout of 38.15 percent in the ratification process. In 2026? Only 19.25 percent, or virtually a 50 percent drop. Again, no vote of confidence but skepticism, distrust, disappointment.

In any case, what did those 90-plus percent actually vote for? In the WGA's case: sub-inflation wage increases (1.5 percent in the first year, then 3 percent annually), massive healthcare givebacks that shift thousands of dollars in new costs onto individual writers and their families and AI provisions that allow studios to use writers' work for training models without giving individual writers the right to refuse.

The healthcare plan "infusion" of \$321 million that the article celebrates was partially obtained by cutting benefits and shifting money from other union funds, including parental leave. Writers who previously had fully covered healthcare now face higher premiums, deductibles and out-of-pocket costs.

In SAG-AFTRA's case, the same four-year lock-in, the same sub-inflation wages, the same AI framework that permits digital replication of performers under "negotiated conditions," including individual contracting between corporations and actors, which creates

conditions where performers can be pressured into signing away their rights as a condition of getting work. Only 12 percent of SAG-AFTRA members now make more than \$28,090 a year, the threshold to qualify for benefits.

The HR concludes on a note of reassurance: "2026 was a very particular moment in entertainment ... don't count on cordiality being the new normal." The implication is that the unions will fight again when conditions improve.

This fundamentally misreads the dynamic. The union bureaucracy avoided a strike because the 2023 experience terrified it. The 2023 strike mobilized tens of thousands of writers and actors, won broad working class support and demonstrated the objective possibility of a direct challenge to the domination of the entertainment industry by a handful of conglomerates.

The bureaucracy shut it down behind closed doors before the membership could even vote on the tentative agreement, then packaged it as a "victory." The lesson the bureaucracy drew from 2023 was that a strike, even one they control, is dangerous because it creates the possibility of rank-and-file organization breaking free of bureaucratic control.

The HR's article treats the union leadership as the natural and permanent representative of entertainment workers. Sean Astin "struck a diplomatic tone." Danielle Sanchez-Witzel praised the AMPTP for coming "ready to talk." Greg Hessinger "helped reset the relationship." The entire narrative assumes that workers' interests are advanced through the personalities and negotiating styles of officials.

This is a falsehood. The interests of entertainment workers cannot be advanced through an apparatus that is structurally integrated into the industry it claims to fight. This apparatus is not the workers' representative, but their enemy. The answer is to build independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled organizations that operate outside and against the union bureaucracy, capable of coordinating across crafts, across unions and across industries.

The Hollywood writer facing AI replacement, the SAG-AFTRA performer losing healthcare eligibility, the WGAW staffer stripped of coverage for going on strike, the Detroit autoworker facing plant closure, the University of California healthcare worker whose strike was canceled in the middle of the night by AFSCME—They all face the same financial oligarchy and the same apparatus of betrayal. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has been built precisely to make this unity a reality.



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