SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy backs Trump's protectionist Hollywood agenda

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Last month, the Trump administration proposed the Motion Picture, Television, and Entertainment Revitalization Act, which would establish a 20 percent federal production tax credit combinable with existing state incentives. The proposal provides credits for qualifying domestic production and labor costs and requires productions to meet specified domestic workforce thresholds. Its most ardent supporters are Hollywood's union bureaucracies.

The federal incentive would supplement programs already operating in states, including Georgia, California, New York and Texas. The administration has presented the measure as a response to the growth of subsidized production in countries, including Canada, Britain and Australia, claiming that these incentives have contributed to roughly 45 percent of US scripted projects being produced overseas.

A tax credit functions as a direct government subsidy, transferring public money to the studios. The beneficiaries are Disney, Warner Bros., Netflix and the other conglomerates whose executives and stockholders reap the returns, not the writers, actors and crew members facing collapsing employment and stagnant real wages. Washington would in effect be taking a policy that has already failed at the state level and expanding it nationally, adding another layer of public spending in favor of the oligarchy.

Nor does the measure even succeed on its own narrow economic terms. More than 40 states have experimented with film tax incentives; more than a dozen have abandoned them because they failed to generate sufficient returns. Georgia, the much-touted "Hollywood of the South," receives only 19 cents in tax revenue for every dollar it spends on film credits, at a cost to taxpayers of nearly $1 billion annually.

New York's own Department of Taxation and Finance concluded that its film credit delivers roughly 15 cents in direct state revenue per dollar of tax break, rising to only 31 cents when indirect effects are included—"at best a break-even proposition and more likely a net cost." The subsidies themselves become commodities, with studios selling unused credits to third parties, while some subsidized facilities have ended up sitting empty.

It is this corporate-welfare scheme that has produced a remarkable political spectacle: an instant alliance between Trump and some of his ostensible opponents. SAG-AFTRA, IATSE and the Motion Picture Association have all endorsed the proposal, alongside Democratic politicians like Senator Adam Schiff and Governor Gavin Newsom, who previously sought billions in federal film credits themselves. Politicians who otherwise posture as advocates of taxing the rich are joining studio executives in seeking special tax advantages for one industry.

The most telling statements come from the union bureaucracy. Last February, IATSE International President Matthew Loeb traveled to Washington to meet with members of Congress and administration officials over the proposed federal film and television tax incentive. Loeb also joined Trump's Special Ambassador to Hollywood, the ultra-reactionary Jon Voight, Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien, Motion Picture Association chief Charles Rivkin, Trump administration officials and other politicians and industry representatives at a Washington event promoting the measure.

Loeb framed the campaign explicitly in nationalist terms, calling for the US to compete with foreign countries offering production incentives. He declared that "America has fallen behind" and that the federal government must "save this signature American industry."

SAG-AFTRA President Sean Astin, a longtime Democrat and outspoken Trump critic, has likewise praised the administration's push for federal production incentives. In a joint statement with National Executive Director Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, Astin said it was essential to ensure that "the United States remains a global leader in film and television production" and argued that a federal incentive would "bring more productions and thousands of jobs back to the United States." SAG-AFTRA, he added, was prepared to work with the administration, Congress and industry representatives.

This is the corporatist-chauvinist program of the union bureaucracy. Workers are told that their jobs can be protected only by making the United States a more profitable location for capital than its competitors. The unions do not challenge the premise that corporations should receive public money to create jobs. They enforce it, acting as the industrial police of American capitalism: binding workers to nationalism, subordinating them to the demands of profit and enforcing the exploitation and divisions of the capitalist system.

Astin's "global leader" is not the working class but American capital. His appeal aligns perfectly with Trump's economic nationalism, the same protectionist logic by which the administration threatens tariffs on foreign films and pits American workers against their counterparts in Canada, Britain and Australia.

This comes shortly after the Directors Guild of America and IATSE have openly supported Trump's ally David Ellison in his Paramount-Warner merger, a corporate move that comes at an exorbitant cost for workers.

The political danger is already visible. Once Washington controls the distribution of billions in production incentives, politicians—whether the fascistic Trump or the Democrats, should the pendulum swing in November—will attach conditions to the money. The unions, having enlisted in this scheme, will facilitate this.

This is of a piece with the record of the entertainment unions. In 2021, after 60,000 film and television workers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, the IATSE leadership called off the confrontation and pushed through a contract that was rejected by a majority of voting members. The 2024 negotiations repeated the pattern.

The 2023 strikes by the WGA and SAG-AFTRA, which mobilized tens of thousands of workers and demonstrated the objective possibility of challenging the conglomerates, were shut down behind closed doors and packaged as "victories."

The 2026 contract cycle featured no strike at all, a coordinated preemptive capitulation in which the WGA leadership announced a tentative agreement a month before expiration, without a strike authorization vote; and SAG-AFTRA locked in a four-year term that disarms workers through 2030, the period when AI-driven restructuring is projected to peak. Only 12.7 percent of SAG-AFTRA members now earn more than the $28,090 threshold for benefits.

The bureaucracy is a distinct social layer whose material interests are bound up with the corporations and the Democratic Party. In February 2026, 115 staff members of the Writers Guild of America West struck their own union over wages and retaliation, while WGAW Executive Director Ellen Stutzman earned $761,624 in 2025 and a prior executive director took home over $1 million. The union that poses as the defender of writers against corporate exploitation was itself the target of its workers' strike.

The same apparatus operates across every industry. The UAW, Unifor, the USW all enforce the competitive framework, suppress strikes and channel opposition back into the Democratic Party. Unifor is today promoting the trade war and Canadian militarism as it rams through a "pattern" agreement with General Motors ahead of the September 21 expiration, precisely to block rank-and-file opposition.

But the rank and file are increasingly opposing this. In the last two months alone: 10,000 John Deere workers rejected a sellout contract extension, defying a UAW apparatus that tried to smother the 2027 fight before it began. Some 1,200 workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario, entered the third week of a strike against a USW bureaucracy that abandoned the fight against piecework. The Nexteer Workers Rank-and-File Committee was formed to oppose UAW sabotage. Educators in Victoria, Australia formed a rank-and-file committee amid mass opposition to a sellout deal.

At the center of this revolt stands the campaign of Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist running for president of the UAW on a program of rank-and-file power and internationalism. Lehman's campaign is a direct challenge to the nationalism that the union apparatuses—including SAG-AFTRA under Astin—now embrace.

When a UAW official issued a death threat against Lehman, workers in the United States, Mexico, Britain, New Zealand and Germany rose to his defense. GM workers in Silao, Mexico issued statements supporting Lehman and demanding the freedom of Ukrainian socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk.

The lesson is the same in Hollywood as in auto. The enemy is not the Georgia worker or the Canadian worker employed by a company receiving a tax incentive. It is the conglomerates that use workers' divisions to demand ever larger concessions from governments. The fight must be taken out of the hands of the union bureaucracies and put into the hands of workers themselves, through independent rank-and-file committees united across crafts, industries and national borders.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) exists to make that unity a reality. Against the nationalism of Trump, Astin and the union officialdom, the only answer is the international unity of the working class against the capitalist system that pits worker against worker.

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