

Anger over actors' dire conditions erupts in SAG-AFTRA

David Walsh
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The regularly scheduled two-day meeting of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) National Board this past weekend was dominated by the increasingly difficult conditions of wide layers of the union's membership. SAG-AFTRA has some 170,000 media professional members, of whom approximately 100,000 are classified as actors and performers.

In its headline about the meeting, *The Wrap* described SAG-AFTRA president Sean Astin as having had to respond to "Actors' Outcry Over Health Insurance." The article itself commented that Astin had noted

the frustration and desperation many [SAG-AFTRA members] feel as declining job opportunities have made it difficult to pay membership dues and qualify for the guild's health plan.

SAG-AFTRA members qualify for health insurance by reaching a set threshold of earnings within a 12-month period. The minimum earned requirement is \$28,090 for 2026 and \$28,933 for 2027, with substantial increases scheduled for 2028 and beyond. Alternatively, union members can qualify by meeting an Eligibility Days threshold of at least 108 days.

In the "good old days," i.e., May 2023, *Variety* estimated that "only 5-15% of members earn enough to qualify for the health care threshold of \$26,470" and that only 2 percent of the union's membership "safely earn a middle class wage. ... The workforce is becoming ever more precarious, gig-like and uncertain." Since that time, conditions have worsened sharply, including roughly a 30 percent drop

in overall entertainment employment and nearly a 50 percent decline in job openings for scripted television.

This has disastrously affected the ability of many once reliably employed actors to obtain health insurance.

The *Hollywood Reporter* explains:

While many actors have struggled to qualify for health insurance in the past, the sharp drop-off of scripted television series orders and the rise of runaway production amid industry consolidation and cost-cutting in recent years are cumulatively weighing on performers. ... And amid rampant health care inflation, qualifying isn't about to get any easier. Starting Jan. 1, quarterly eligibility premiums will rise, as will the earnings threshold by 1 percent, with more 1 percent bumps coming in the years after.

One of the most irrational and foul features of the situation is that a performer, as actor Cheyenne Jackson points out, "can make \$350,000 a year acting, and then the next year it's lean, but sadly that money from before doesn't necessarily carry over and help you to the next year."

The anger over these circumstances has recently burst to the surface. Actors have gone public about a situation that was once considered embarrassing to acknowledge: not being able to meet the union threshold.

Jackson's unprecedented launch of "One Job Away" is one indication of the new conditions. Jackson has acted in more than 40 television series, but last year found himself on the verge of not meeting the annual

minimum. He estimated that he was one “gig short” of getting his insurance. Jackson reached out to his friend actor Kathy Bates and through her good graces, obtained five lines on the legal drama series *Matlock*.

Jackson explained on Instagram earlier this week

I’m starting a little series called ONE JOB AWAY, spotlighting fellow actors who are close to qualifying for their SAG health insurance and could use a little help with that next booking. I’ll share their faces, their work, and how to reach them.

He told the *Hollywood Reporter*, “This is systematic. This is like across the whole swath of SAG actors working right now ... This is what’s happening. People that have been leads of television shows have worked for years and years and years, and you know their faces, and you know their work. This year, they’re like, ‘What am I going to do?’”

With 741,000 Instagram followers, Jackson says he has received “hundreds” of submissions in less than 24 hours.

Jackson doesn’t criticize the SAG-AFTRA leadership, while others are not so coy. On his Instagram site, actor Drake Bell posted an image of the SAG-AFTRA health plan website announcing “you do not qualify for Health Plan coverage at this time. Your reported covered earnings from July 2025-June 2026 did not meet minimum eligibility requirements, or you did not qualify other eligibility rules.”

Bell angrily captioned his post, “Do not become an actor. Do not join SAG. You can work steadily for 35 years and they will say [middle finger emoji].”

Heather Matarazzo (*Welcome to the Dollhouse*, *The Princess Diaries*) revealed her own situation recently.

“I am literally in the same boat right now. Lots of my fellow actors are,” she wrote. “I remember a time when we didn’t have to earn a minimum to qualify for insurance.”

Actor Bayne Gibby bluntly told the *Hollywood Reporter*, “When we went on strike in 2023, I think people were all in because they really thought, ‘We’re going to make this sacrifice in the short term for some greater benefit in the longer term,’ and I think the way

a lot of my peers are feeling now is, ‘Why did we strike? Why did we make that huge sacrifice? Because things have not gotten better.’”

At the plenary meeting, Sean Astin revealed the impotence and uselessness of the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy, essentially throwing his hands in the air. “The bottom line,” he commented, “is that no agreement can make studios produce more or make audiences watch. But what we can do, what your union can do and is doing, is to use every bit of leverage we have to make sure working performers have a place in whatever this industry becomes.”

SAG-AFTRA and all the entertainment unions hitched their wagon to the conglomerates, their fate and what the latter claim they can afford. When times were (relatively) good in Hollywood, some of this shortsightedness and treachery was concealed. The present crisis and semi-collapse has revealed the reality. The economic and cultural defense and existence of film and television production depends on breaking the corporate stranglehold through independent working class action. The rank and file will have to take matters into their own hands.



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