SAG-AFTRA's bureaucracy purges the rank-and-file

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Actor John Christian Love, known to millions as Ernie on *Better Call Saul*, asked his union, the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), for relief from the dues he could not pay. He was then living in his car. “You know me as Ernie on *Better Call Saul*,” he wrote on Reddit, “and they gave me no leniency.” He was told to pay the full $3,000.

Love is one of hundreds of working performers stripped of their union membership on November 1, when SAG-AFTRA reinstated the dues-enforcement machinery it had suspended during the pandemic and the 2023 strike. The union says it “must return to our traditional and constitutionally-mandated membership dues billing practices.” That language, appropriately enough, sounds more like a collection agency than a fighting organization of the working class.

SAG-AFTRA charges a base annual due of $246.14 plus 1.575 percent of all earnings under union contract. Membership is automatically terminated after 18 months of non-payment. To be reinstated, a terminated member must pay past-due obligations, current dues, a $100 application fee and a reinstatement fee that frequently totals more than $3,000. The Reinstatement Obligations Review Committee, which is supposed to evaluate financial hardship, almost never grants leniency.

The purge is the internal administrative counterpart of a macroeconomic collapse that involves the entire industry. Following the 2023 strikes, the studios abandoned the streaming wars for debt reduction and financial restructuring, and the jobs started to vanish.

Disney ordered thousands of layoffs only this year, and last month instructed managers to find 20 percent in cost savings. Netflix eliminated nearly 1,000 jobs and shifted away from director-driven films toward lower-cost, mid-budget productions. The $110 billion Skydance merger of Paramount and Warner Bros. Discovery, saddled with over $80 billion in debt, has already laid off more than 2,000 workers and projects 4,500 to 6,000 job losses in Los Angeles alone. Sony and NBCUniversal (now rumored to be targeted by Netflix for purchase) are undergoing similar measures.

Hollywood is suffering a 30 to 40 percent reduction in production and a 50 percent drop in scripted-television job openings. Radford Studio Center, valued at $1.85 billion in 2021, may now sell for roughly one-fifth of that after Hackman Capital defaulted on $1.1 billion in debt. This is the same finance capital that inflated the bubble: now it is liquidating it and workers are the collateral.

The health plan is the sharpest expression of the crisis and points most directly to the need for a socialized system. To qualify for the SAG-AFTRA Health Plan through earnings, a member must receive $28,090 in covered earnings (i.e., union gigs, which are becoming increasingly rare) during the applicable base earnings period for 2026 coverage, rising to $28,933 in 2027. Members can also qualify by working 108 eligibility days. But according to an October 2026 report in the *Los Angeles Times*, only approximately 14 percent of the union’s 160,000 members qualify for its health plan.

Even those who retain coverage find it hollowed out. Cecily Strong, after years on *Saturday Night Live*, publicly challenged the Health Plan’s slashing of the “allowed amount” for out-of-network mental-health care, leaving members with “super high bills” of “hundreds to thousands of dollars a month” they never budgeted for.

What is striking about the current wave of protest is that it is coming from performers of all levels of notoriety. Joe Camareno earned more than twice the health-plan threshold this year, yet the plan’s eligibility calculation left him thousands of dollars short. “It just means I lose coverage. I lose access to my doctors,” he told CBS Los Angeles. Julie Marchiano described a household where both she and her husband were out of work, with COBRA “really expensive, especially for, at this point, an almost

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zero income house."

Asia Kate Dillon, whose credits include *Billions* and *Orange Is the New Black*, publicly circulated a résumé seeking restaurant work. Jack Haven, of *I Saw the TV Glow*, appealed for work to meet an immediate deadline to preserve health coverage. Former child star Drake Bell published his health-plan rejection notice after 35 years in the industry, advising aspiring artists: "Do not become an actor. Do not join SAG."

Heather Matarazzo and Bayne Gibby have spoken out in despair that despite the immense sacrifices of the 2023 strike, conditions have deteriorated. Cheyenne Jackson launched the "One Job Away" campaign to spotlight veteran actors on the brink and admitted he was only saved from losing his own insurance by Kathy Bates securing him a five-line guest role on *Matlock*.

The insulting mantra that creative workers have chosen a precarious profession in the first place must be rejected. Human society needs arts and culture and resources are abundant to secure that artists are supported like any other worker who contributes to the wealth, material and intellectual, of society.

All of this unfolds amid staggering wealth. The top 18 Hollywood executives received a combined $746 million in compensation in 2025. Disney's Bob Iger stood at an 805-to-1 pay ratio in relation to his employees.

And into this surreal social environment steps the newly elected mayor of Los Angeles, Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)-affiliated Nithya Raman, backed by hedge-fund billionaire Aaron Sosnick to the tune of $7 million. Raman, who voted for a fiscal emergency proposing 1,600 layoffs, plus four consecutive city budgets that increased police funding and now says she no longer supports defunding the police, will do nothing to fight the billionaires and centimillionaires. On the contrary: her function, like that of the entire DSA, is to absorb working-class anger and channel it back into the Democratic Party, which serves the same oligarchy.

SAG-AFTRA President Sean Astin has acknowledged "the palpable disconnect between the work of this union and the lived experience of too many of our members." The same Astin sent a message to the membership urging them to lobby Congress for Trump's federal production incentive, a scheme to hand $133 billion in public money to the studios in the form of corporate tax subsidies: "That's what a union is all about: collective action for the betterment of all members." His "collective action" is directed at Congress on behalf of the studios, not at the studios on behalf of the members.

The union hopes its members will forget all about its betrayals. The 2023 strike mobilized tens of thousands and demonstrated the objective possibility of challenging the conglomerates. It was shut down behind closed doors and packaged as a "victory." The contract did nothing to protect jobs or prohibit AI likeness reproduction: it established legal terms for studio consent and compensation, validating the replacement of background and voice actors with digital synthetic performers.

In 2026 there was no strike at all: it was a coordinated preemptive capitulation in which SAG-AFTRA locked in a four-year term that commits workers through 2030, precisely as the studios accelerate their adoption of artificial intelligence and restructure production around increasingly automated workflows. The $750 million California incentive campaign led by Newsom and promoted by every union bureaucracy has failed to stop the bleeding because subsidies to capital never protect workers.

Meanwhile, National Executive Director Duncan Crabtree-Ireland took home $1,120,502 in 2025. He is backed by more than a dozen non-elected executives drawing $300,000 to $700,000 annually. On October 24, with US-based production spending and employment under sustained pressure, the SAG-AFTRA National Board voted 98.34 percent to extend Crabtree-Ireland's contract through 2032 and expand his title to CEO. The 160,000 members had no direct say in securing another six years for SAG-AFTRA's highest-paid executive, but they will pay for his seven-digit salary.

The bureaucracy fears an uncontrolled rank-and-file confrontation as much as the studios do, which is precisely why the contracts are so concessionary and the purges so ruthless. What can be won will only be determined in struggle, and that struggle must be organized independently by workers themselves. In fact, decent living standards, the defense of arts, culture and democratic rights, as well as adequate health care coverage, are inseparable from the fight for socialism.



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