

Screen Actors Poised to Join Writers in Entertainment Industry Strike

Combined SAG-AFTRA and WGA work stoppages would paralyze production centers from Hollywood to New York City

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Global Research, July 14, 2023

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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Despite the enormous profits being made by the film and television corporations in the United States, the writers, actors and announcers are undergoing pay cuts and threats to their future employment.

Since early May, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) has been on strike for better salaries, benefits and job security in a rapidly changing industry where streaming and the use of artificial intelligence have become avenues for greater exploitation and marginalization of scribes and performers.

The WGA claims that the billions of dollars in investments made by the motion pictures and television studios over the last decade has resulted in salary and benefits losses. Furthermore, they believe that the current system of working within the industry is broken. Union leaders are saying that the changes being implemented by the owners and management threatens writing as a profession.

Negotiations between the writers and the studios broke down on May 1 when the two sides were unable to reach an agreement to avoid a strike. The strike has delayed production on many film and television projects in the U.S. and internationally.

In regard to actors, the early phases of the coronavirus pandemic witnessed the introduction of certain forms of auditioning for jobs by performers which were done virtually without compensation. Other issues such as declining rates of residual payments related to reruns, streaming, syndication, etc., are key elements in the rising discontent among the union membership.



Writers Guild of America on the picket line during 2023

In the latest round of labor unrest, the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) authorized a strike in early June by a margin of 98% after failing to reach an agreement with the studio owners represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). The combined strike action involving the WGA and SAG-AFTRA could effectively shut down the entertainment industry in the U.S.

The SAG-AFTRA contract was extended to July 12 in the hope that an agreement could be reached with AMPTP. However, the AMPTP accused the SAG-AFTRA of being unreasonable in their demands and that the decision to strike is the total responsibility of the actors and announcers.

AMPTP represents the long-established major studios along with streaming platforms including Amazon, Netflix and NBCUniversal. In a press release from the AMPTP they emphasized:

“Rather than continuing to negotiate, SAG-AFTRA has put us on a course that will deepen the financial hardship for thousands who depend on the industry for their livelihood.” (See [this](#))

This is the first time since 1960 that there has been a joint strike involving the writers, actors and announcers. There are 11,000 WGA members on strike, and they are being joined by 160,000 people represented by the SAG-AFTRA).

The industry has experienced a series of strikes since 1936. Other work stoppages have occurred among the writers and actors during the 1960s right through the present century. (See [this](#))

[In a statement](#) on July 13 issued by the SAG President Fran Drescher and Chief Negotiator

Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, they say:

“The AMPTP has refused to acknowledge that enormous shifts in the industry and economy have had a detrimental impact on those who perform labor for the studios. Though we’ve engaged in negotiations in good faith and remained eager to reach a deal that sufficiently addressed performer concerns, the AMPTP’s responses to our proposals have not been adequate.... Our ninety-year history is a testament to what can be achieved through our conviction and unity. For the future of our profession, we stand together.”

Broader Economic Impact of an Entertainment Industry Strike

Tensions within the entertainment industry have been brewing for months. In June, well-known actors such as Meryl Streep, John Leguizamo, Jennifer Lawrence, Constance Wu and Ben Stiller, sent a letter to the SAG officials saying they are prepared to strike.

The advent of a long strike by the SAG-AFTRA and the WGA would further delay the completion of films and television productions. Even actors and writers from other countries have pledged to honor the labor actions by their counterparts in the U.S.

Advertising revenues would be severely impacted by an industry-wide strike since the large corporations utilize television, radio and movie screenings to promote their products. A delay in film releases will inevitably cause significant losses for movie houses which are still reeling from the pandemic. Many theaters have closed in major urban areas unable to recover from the revenue losses over a period of nearly two years of lockdowns and public health restrictions.

Moreover, those writers, actors and announcers working in the industry would be faced with the grim prospects of permanent layoffs. This is why the union leaders are sounding the alarm that the role of writers and actors are at stake in the current phase of labor relations in the industry.

As the chief negotiator for the SAG Crabtree-Ireland [noted](#):

“We’re looking to make sure that acting can be a sustainable career choice for people, not just the 100 most famous celebrities in the world, but for the whole large population of our membership. They should be able to make a living and you know, pay a mortgage or pay rent like everybody else. We’re fundamentally interested in making sure that our members share in the success of projects that they create. We have a real vested interest in making sure that something significant is done about this, so that we’re not trying to fix it retroactively three years from now. It needs to be done now.”

One of the most anticipated films of the summer, “Oppenheimer”, made its UK premiere on July 12 in London. The red-carpet celebration was held to promote the official release on July 21 by Universal Pictures. The film is based on the role of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the theoretical physicist involved in the manufacture of the first atomic bomb known as the Manhattan Project.

Co-star Emily Blunt said that in the event of a strike by the SAG-AFTRA she would not remain in Britain for the broader opening and would return to the U.S. She was quoted [as saying](#):

“I think right now we are just sorting of ... I hope everyone makes a fair deal and we are here to celebrate this movie. And if they call it, we’ll be leaving together as cast in unity with everyone ...We are gonna have to. We will see what happens. Right now, it’s the joy to be together.”

A Summer of Strikes

In the U.S., the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strike comes amid a wave of industrial actions. The Teamsters union representing 340,000 UPS workers are slated to walk off the job at the end of July. This could represent the largest private sector strike against a single employer in U.S. history.

The UAW began its negotiations with the automotive industry during mid-July, where the new leadership has pledged to take a harder line against the corporations. The traditional handshake between labor and management was avoided to indicate that the union leadership is committed to protecting the interests of the workers.

UAW leaders have postponed any presidential endorsements until further notice unlike the AFL-CIO, which at its recent national conference, gave its full backing to the re-election of Democratic Party President Joe Biden. The AFL-CIO has said publicly that Biden is the most pro-labor president in history.

Nonetheless, the majority of rank-and-file workers obviously have a different opinion. Several recent polls reveal that Biden’s ratings remain extremely low for a president in his first term. The majority of registered voters interviewed said that Biden should not seek another term due to his age.

However, even more significantly, most people stated that the economy was the major concern in the present period. There have been monthly reports saying that the jobless rate stands at 3.4-3.5%.

Even though the unemployment rate is low, the inability of workers to keep up with the rate of inflation has fueled hardships at the gas stations, supermarkets, car dealerships, rental properties and the payments for mortgage rates. The phenomenon of rising prices for energy and durable goods has slowed since the middle of 2022.

However, the costs for essential commodities and services are still far too high for many working families and the extremely impoverished. The federal minimum wage in the U.S. has not been raised since 2009 during the Great Recession.

Consequently, the working class must continue to organize and act in order to protect its own interests. Otherwise, the rightward shift related to labor relations will continue rendering people to even more dire social conditions across the U.S.

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