

Entertainment industry union IATSE pauses negotiations with studios, workers continue to be left in the dark

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After a Thursday deadline passed without any agreement on key issues including wages, artificial intelligence and working conditions, bargaining sessions between the 60,000 member International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers (AMPTP) were paused until early June.

Said IATSE president Matthew Loeb, “We are working toward setting additional bargaining dates to continue to negotiate the deal our members deserve. Talks remain ongoing and we are focused on achieving the goals we came to the table with: improved wages and safer working conditions, consistent funding for our benefit plans, reasonable AI and subcontracting protections, and appropriate enhancements to our Video Tape Agreement and Side Letters.”

This is simply an effort to massage the membership and keep its anger under control. What’s really going on is that the producers, under the gun from Wall Street and major investors, are determined to cut costs and jobs, while IATSE is desperately appealing to the studios for *something* it can “sell” to the workers. IATSE has signed one concessionary contract after another, and its *only* goal is to find a means of imposing a new one.

Funding for members’ health and pension plans is at high risk, according to the union. An April 28 message shared with members claimed the plans will require an estimated \$670 million in funding over the next three years. As a result, the union is proposing the implementation of a supplemental 401(k) plan as a means ultimately to diminish both the matching contributions of the studio heads and the retirement benefits received by members.

In addition to the retirement plan proposals, IATSE leadership has indicated that other concessions will be made. “We still do face challenges on some key items,” a recent memo to members stated. “It’s understood that *compromise is an essential aspect of every negotiation,*

and this one will be no exception.” [emphasis added] A comment like that ought to set off alarm bells: betrayal ahead!

Aside from the 401(k) proposal, however, other facets of the negotiations have been left deliberately amorphous.

In order to cover over this fact, the IATSE leadership set up two websites during the negotiations process, one covering the union’s Basic Agreement and the other the Area Standards Agreement. While the sites contain detailed timelines and various facts surrounding the bargaining process in general, no details are provided about the actual discussions.

Regular “updates” covering the bargaining sessions are left intentionally vague. As an example, a May 3 update states that “Talks with employers on the Basic Agreement restarted on April 29 and are scheduled to remain ongoing through May 16. These negotiations cover issues like wage increases, pension and health contributions, artificial intelligence, quality of life conditions, job security and residuals.” This tells workers exactly nothing.

Both the West Coast Locals’ Basic Agreement and the Area Standards Agreement expire on July 31. The union has stated that it could possibly conduct a strike authorization vote should a deal not be reached on either of the two.

The lack of transparency is particularly galling to workers as the degree of exploitation by the studios has soared in recent years, with many below-line workers regularly working 12-hour and sometimes up to 20-hour shifts, while the studios continue to rake in billions in profits.

Last week, after a “Fraturday” (the name given to Fridays where workers work deep into the morning hours of Saturday—according to one industry worker, “The loss of your entire weekend to a work schedule that sees you beginning your day on Friday, and getting off work early Saturday, sometimes after the sun comes up”), grip Rico Priem, a member of IATSE Local 80, died in an auto accident after working 14 hours on the set of the ABC

television series *9-1-1*.

The *Hollywood Reporter* noted that “Priem was a day player on *9-1-1* and his shift on Friday was his second 14-hour production day in a row ... Priem left work a little after 4 a.m. on Saturday morning.”

According to the police, “Priem’s Toyota Highlander was found overturned and obstructing the right lanes on the 57 freeway in San Dimas; the crash was reported around 4:27 a.m. on Saturday. According to CHP, Priem’s vehicle drove off the road and up an embankment before flipping onto its roof. Priem was found dead at the scene.”

The union immediately issued a defensive and dishonest press release: “We are fully committed to the safety and the well-being of all our members and express our heartfelt condolences to the member’s family,” IATSE claimed in its statement. “Workers have a reasonable expectation that they can get to work and come home safely. No one should be put in unsafe circumstances while trying to earn a living.”

Local 80 Business Manager DeJon Ellis asserted that there has “been a lot of pressure to do more in less time, so now our people are expected to not only work 12, but 14, 15, 16 hours day after day.” His union has been entirely complicit in this process. It is nothing more than an extension of corporate management making sure that workers are kept under control.

The *Hollywood Reporter* was frank enough to point out that the “sprawling length of production work days and how they affect commutes home has long been a safety concern for crew members and their advocates.” After noting that IATSE members “were outspoken about the safety risks of over-12-hour production shifts during the union’s negotiations cycle in 2021,” the publication goes on to assert that IATSE “is again prioritizing financial penalties for long work days and missed rest periods during its ongoing negotiations with studios and streamers.” The rank and file are angry and restive, the fabulously paid union leadership, Loeb (\$511,000 salary in 2022) and company, will do nothing to improve conditions.

The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers issued a thoroughly hypocritical and cynical statement, claiming that “Our hearts go out to Rico Priem’s family, friends, and all of those who are impacted by this tragic loss of life.” Workers’ lives mean nothing to these people.

During the negotiations in 2021, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned of the deadly dangers involved in the terms negotiated by IATSE that allowed for unlimited shift lengths, as long as there was a 10-hour break in between.

The 10-hour turnarounds themselves were a climbdown from the 12- to 14-hour turnaround times demanded by workers, and it was proposed by IATSE only days after receiving an overwhelming vote in support of a strike.

Nervous about the immense outrage among the membership around the lack of transparency in the current negotiations, a group calling itself the “Caucus of Rank-and-File Entertainment Workers” recently circulated a petition urging union leadership to update “members regularly with a detailed list of IATSE’s local and general proposals and the AMPTP’s responses, from now until the end of negotiations.”

The petition correctly highlights the fraudulent nature of the last contract between IATSE and the AMPTP, passed in 2021, in which the union used an “electoral college”-type system to override the majority vote against the contract at the time.

Missing from the petition, however, is any mention of last year’s contract between the AMPTP and SAG-AFTRA which provided no protections whatsoever for actors from the growing use of AI.

The caucus, known as CREW, was formed through the efforts of Labor Notes in an attempt to shore up support for the IATSE bureaucracy while attempting to divert workers away from the need to organize genuinely independent rank-and-file committees.

IATSE workers should in fact demand that all details of the contract negotiations be released but should go much further than that and demand that all negotiations be live-streamed. Furthermore, workers should call for an all-out mobilization of entertainment workers to demand decent wages and job protections, and not wait for more than two months for the bureaucracy to decide whether or not to hold a strike vote.

Strike plans should also be coordinated with university and education workers in particular who are eager to fight against the police-state crackdown against students and faculty protesting the genocide in the Gaza Strip. They are being kept isolated by the UAW and other education unions through the use of fraudulent “stand up strikes” engineered by Shawn Fain and the UAW bureaucracy.

Entertainment workers need to take the measure of the IATSE leadership and form democratically controlled rank-and-file committees independent of the bureaucracy and the capitalist political parties, parties of war, poverty and attacks on democratic rights.



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