

IATSE announces tentative agreement: film and television workers need to prepare to oppose betrayal

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The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) announced a tentative agreement (TA) on the Hollywood Basic Agreement and the Videotape Agreement negotiations Tuesday night, only two days into the resumption of the talks that had stalled twice.

The Basic Agreement (BA) covers 50,000 below-the-line entertainment workers in the 13 Hollywood IATSE locals, while the Videotape Agreement covers workers on live television programs including variety shows, news, game and talk shows, daytime serials, live musicals, awards shows and sports broadcasts.

IATSE promised in their announcement of the TA that a “complete summary of the tentative agreement will be released in a few days.”

In keeping with the lack of transparency throughout the negotiations, the union immediately insisted that to “avoid undermining our fellow members in the Area Standards Agreement (ASA) Locals, who remain in negotiations with the AMPTP, we will wait to release full summaries of both tentative agreements simultaneously.” The ASA covers 23 IATSE locals and some 20,000 film and television workers around the country, excluding Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and San Francisco.

Given that negotiations on the ASA have yet to resume, a “complete summary” will presumably not be released any time soon. However, IATSE did put out a short follow-up statement June 26, explaining they would also release a “Memorandum of Agreement (M.O.A.) an estimated 2 weeks following this announcement.”

According to IATSE, talks on the BA were stalled mainly due to disagreements over wages and artificial Intelligence (AI). But they were able to overcome this and more in just two days to ink a deal. Workers have every right to be intensely suspicious of this process and its results.

The conditions in the film and television industry are tense and explosive. The Great Hollywood Contraction has meant a substantial loss of jobs and incomes, with far more to come.

Moreover, the deal comes in the wake of the explosive

announcement by the co-CEOs of Paramount, Brian Robbins, Chris McCarthy and George Cheeks, that the company plans to cut \$500 million in annualized costs in the face of a steep drop in profits. The fate of Paramount has been the subject of speculation for months. Robbins, McCarthy and Cheeks indicated at a town hall, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, they would achieve the massive savings “by eliminating duplicative functions and being more efficient with resources.” Large-scale job losses are anticipated.

IATSE would have its members believe that in these circumstances, without a fight, the AMPTP gave way in an important manner. No class-conscious worker, with an awareness of social and political realities, will fall for that. The IATSE leaders’ overriding concern has been to *avoid* a struggle, that would risk unleashing the anger and frustration of the rank-and-file accumulated over years. The very last thing Matthew Loeb (salary \$500,000 a year) and company desire is to mobilize in any manner the strength of tens of thousands of IATSE members. Everything has been done to deflect, wear down and demoralize film and television workers.

It would naïve in the extreme to imagine that anything addressing the needs and interests of IATSE members could emerge from these behind-closed doors negotiations between billion-dollar corporations and highly paid union officials, who operate as an extension of corporate management.

The “highlights” of the TA so far issued by IATSE report a raise of 7 percent in the first year, with raises of 4 and 3.5 percent in the second and third year of the contract, respectively.

The total of 14.5 percent by 2027 does not begin to make up for the loss in income during the last contract, and barely covers the current rate of inflation in California (3.9 percent) for the second year, while falling below it in the third year of the contract. This is what the union officials think is the TA’s strongest selling point.

The workers involved live in some of the most expensive cities in the country. These meager raises mean they will continue in many cases to have long commutes because they are unable to reside near where they work. Long commutes

pose life-and-death issues for workers especially given the next highlight, which ensures that workers will continue to work grueling shifts, as the TA provides triple time for all hours worked over 15 (!) in a 24-hour period.

A further highlight reports that workers will also receive double-time “on the 7th day of the workweek,” rather than after a 40-hour week. Given that shifts of 12 to 20 hours are the norm, double-time for many will not kick in until a minimum of 72 hours have been worked in a week.

The language released on artificial intelligence (AI) is equally disingenuous, and, in this case, meaningless. The agreement, according to IATSE, includes “language that ensures no employee is required to provide AI prompts in any manner that would result in the displacement of any *covered employee*.”[Italics added]

First of all, the word “required” simply means that workers will be *given the opportunity* to accede to company demands concerning AI. If they refuse, as with writers and actors, they will likely find themselves unemployable.

Moreover, this is a formula that allows AI to be integrated in what are termed ultra-low budget films, in which many of the crew are not “covered” employees, and work in some cases right alongside IATSE crewmembers. (As in the case of the film *Rust*, which we have reported on.)

And regarding the \$670 million funding shortfall in the Motion Picture Industry Pension and Health Plans (MPIPHP), the IATSE bureaucrats merely assert that the TA “includes additional payments from employers that would *address* the \$670M funding gap, including new streaming residuals. Additionally, no participant shall incur a break in service for plan year 2023.” (Emphasis added.)

No breaks in service for the plan year 2023, but nothing is said of 2024 or 2025 for that matter. And while the “additional payments” (how much exactly? why is this not spelled out?) may “address” the shortfall, they will certainly not meet it.

That is the entirety of the best portion of the contract cooked up by IATSE officials in cahoots with the AMPTP, although the union ends by saying,

From start to finish, your input was invaluable and ensured that our Negotiations Committee was at the bargaining table with clear goals and a consensus for how to achieve them. The ratification timeline will be forthcoming and we look forward to presenting to you the complete package.

As the WWSWS has pointed out, secrecy and betrayal are IATSE’s watchwords. Every step of the process has taken place behind closed doors and behind the backs of the rank-and-file.

This secrecy is not an effort to avoid negotiating “in the

media” and such hot air. The secrecy is designed to keep workers uninformed and off guard until the last moment. Then, the contract will be sprung on them, vast blasts from the media will inform workers that this “was the best the union could do” and they have no alternative but to accept the AMPTP’s terms. The dire economic conditions will be used as a bludgeon. It is all cynically planned and carried through.

Meanwhile, massive job destruction is already taking place, meaning upheavals in the lives of tens of thousands of workers.

A few headlines will give some indication of the present state of affairs:

“Hollywood’s exodus: Why film and TV workers are leaving Los Angeles” (*Los Angeles Times*); “Hollywood Is Suffering An Economic Slowdown With Writing And Production Jobs Far And Few Between” (*LAist*); “This time last year, Hollywood writers were on strike. Now, many can’t find work” (*NPR*); “Behind the stunning job losses in Hollywood: ‘The audience has moved on’” (*Los Angeles Times*); “Hollywood Contraction Hits Entertainment Executive Jobs: ‘This Is A Full-Scale Depression’” (*Deadline*).

The last article, which deals with studio executives, includes this passage.

“I’ve seen lots of downturns, lots of job losses but I’ve never seen anything like this,” one veteran top TV executive said. “This is a full-scale depression for the entertainment industry.”

Over the past year, there have been waves of layoffs at Disney, Warner Bros Discovery, Paramount, NBCUniversal, Amazon MGM Studios, Lionsgate (which acquired eOne), Netflix, Sony, Fifth Season and most talent agencies including CAA and UTA.

The central problem confronting film and television workers is the profit system.

The struggle facing entertainment workers is an existential one, and the unions exist to stifle and prevent workers from carrying it out. Rotten contracts do not fall out of the sky, but are prepared long in advance. To fight them, workers need to prepare as well. It is imperative that democratically controlled rank-and-file committees are formed independent of the union bureaucrats and the two parties of big business. The committees need to take the initiative of the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucrats and into their own.



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