

700 US actors, directors and performers denounce entertainment unions' silence on Gaza and McCarthyite "repression" of pro-Palestinian views

David Walsh
18 September 2024

A group of more than 700 actors, directors, writers and other film professionals has issued an open letter calling on the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and other entertainment industry guilds to issue a public statement calling for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. The open letter also demands that SAG-AFTRA and other unions condemn the blacklisting of pro-Palestinian union members, which has gone on since Israel's genocidal spree began 11 months ago.

The open letter is diplomatic in some of its language, but the material it presents, most of which has not been mentioned in the press coverage of the protest, is devastating enough. As the Israeli government reveals itself on a daily basis to be nothing more than a machine for murder and terror, the widest possible opposition to its criminality must be mounted.

The letter, in the name of SAG-AFTRA & Sister Guild Members for Ceasefire, notes that following "SAG-AFTRA's statement in sympathy with Israel regarding October 7 ... our union leadership has remained silent." Meanwhile,

many SAG-AFTRA and sister guild members have watched in horror as the Israeli government wages a war of collective punishment on the civilian population of Gaza — killing over 40,000 Palestinians, injuring over 90,000 more, forcibly displacing 2 million people, and openly targeting members of the press and their families. As the IDF continues its assault on "safe zones," schools, and hospitals, and as civilians in Gaza die from starvation, dehydration, and lack of medical supplies and fuel, major human rights groups have labeled these acts as war crimes, human rights atrocities, and even genocide. The UN has described Gaza as a "graveyard for children" — and estimate that by mid-July "half of the population — more than a million people — could face death and starvation." As of now, there is no end in sight — only escalation, death, and destruction.

Moreover, the protest goes on,

SAG-AFTRA and nearly all our sister guilds have remained silent in the face of flagrant and unprecedented attacks on freedom of the press, including the deliberate targeting and murder of Palestinian journalists and their families by the IDF. The Committee to Protect Journalists has declared the war on Gaza "the deadliest period for journalists covering conflict since CPJ began tracking in 1992." Some of those journalists were members of news organizations whose domestic affiliates are represented under SAG-AFTRA contracts. While SAG-AFTRA issued a public statement at the outset of the Ukraine war demanding that "journalists of all nations working in the war zone are kept safe," its words now ring hollow if they only apply to some journalists of certain identities.

The open letter was signed by prominent figures such as actors and performers Mark Ruffalo, Cynthia Nixon, Susan Sarandon and Rosie O'Donnell. Riz Ahmed, Common, Busy Philipps, Richa Moorjani, Griffin Dunne, Kendrick Sampson, Indya Moore, Sara Ramirez, Amrit Kaur, Bruce Cohen, James Schamus, Lorenza Izzo and Saul Williams are among the other notable figures who signed the letter.

The various signatories are members of SAG-AFTRA, IATSE, Writers Guild, Teamsters, Directors Guild, Equity, American Federation of Musicians, Hollywood Basic Crafts, Casting Society of America and Producers Guild.

They further point out in their protest that on December 13, 2023,

Israeli forces attacked The Freedom Theatre in the Jenin refugee camp and kidnapped several of its members — fellow actors and directors, who have called for solidarity from theatre workers worldwide. Palestinian trade unions

have called for international labor solidarity, reminding us that “the struggle for Palestinian justice and liberation is a lever for the liberation of all dispossessed and exploited people of the world.”

The letter continues:

The global call for a ceasefire — from organized labor, artists and fellow SAG-AFTRA members, human rights groups, world leaders, and the majority of the American public — grows louder every day. And yet, our government continues to sponsor the Israeli forces’ assault on Palestinian civilians, and our industry union leadership still refuses to speak out. We reject this silence. Our calling as artists, news reporters, and storytellers is to bring truth to the world. To fight the erasure of life and culture. To unite for justice in the name of the most vulnerable among us. It’s exactly what we did during our historic strike in 2023.

The signatories conclude by demanding that SAG-AFTRA and the other unions

- issue a public statement calling for a ceasefire and the release of all hostages, Palestinian and Israeli, and the funding and delivery of urgently needed humanitarian aid;
- speak out against the targeting and killing of innocent Palestinian civilians, health workers and journalists;
- condemn “our industry’s McCarthyist repression of members who acknowledge Palestinian suffering”;
- and “eliminate any doubt of our solidarity with workers, artists, and oppressed people worldwide.”

A press release that accompanied the open letter cited actor Emily Rose Debinie, who explained,

I and other Palestinian SAG-AFTRA members have family in Gaza that have been displaced multiple times and are still in imminent danger. ... The church where my relatives are sheltering was bombed and 12 died from the same family—including a baby who was killed under the rubble. For my union to ignore our pain feels like a betrayal.

Actor and SAG-AFTRA National MENA [Middle East/North Africa] Committee Chair Amin El Gamal described being “ignored for months” by SAG-AFTRA and then receiving calls “in hushed tones” from union staff who promised meetings but never followed up. “I saw this blatant double standard,” El Gamal said. “How can you mourn the loss of some kinds of people and not others—especially when you have such a diverse membership?”

The references to McCarthyism and blacklisting are entirely appropriate. Such campaigns have been leveled against Susan Sarandon, John Cusack, Melissa Barrera and others. There has

been a systematic effort in Hollywood by the upper echelons to intimidate and terrorize the widespread opposition, in defense of the homicidal Netanyahu regime and the Biden administration, its filthy accomplice.

The press release from the protesting guild members notes that

Celebrities and working-class guild members advocating for a ceasefire have faced blacklisting, job loss, and harassment—sometimes from high-level employers. In one of many such stories, a West Coast actor and their representatives were the targets of a coordinated harassment campaign. The actor has chosen to remain anonymous to avoid further retaliation.

“We received a flood of hateful emails—some from well-known producers. I was scared for my career and my family’s safety,” they said. “It’s our union’s duty to protect us from this new McCarthyism, especially when we’re speaking up for human rights and our labor colleagues. Instead, it’s been deafening silence.”

The press statement points to SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher having attended an IDF fundraiser in 2018 and the undemocratic fact that, according to union staff, “statements are released at the pleasure of the president and executive director—rarely, if ever, involving member input.”

SAG-AFTRA Washington-Mid Atlantic local board member and 2023 strike captain Gabriel Kornbluh was cited as saying, “I’m losing faith in President Drescher’s ability to lead our union down an equitable path. As a Jewish member, I say ‘not in my name’ to Israel’s war crimes and ‘not in my union’s name.’ If our leadership continues to align with the dehumanization of Palestinians—it’s a dereliction of our duty as both artists and unionists.”

The silence on Gaza by the SAG-AFTRA leadership goes hand in hand with the capitulations of all the entertainment unions to the studios, networks and conglomerates on Artificial Intelligence, residuals, wages and jobs.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact