

United States: Actors Walk the Picket Lines

Sunday 23 July 2023, by [MIAH Malik](#) (Date first published: 18 July 2023).

THE ACTORS UNION, 160,000 members strong, went on strike July 14. SAG-AFTRA (Screen Actors Guild-American Federation) picketed outside major Hollywood studios in eight locations, including Los Angeles and New York City. Prominent actors, including Susan Sarandon, were on the line.

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After negotiations between studio representatives of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and the actors' union broke down the union voted to strike by an overwhelming 97.91%.

With the strike, film and television productions ground to a halt. Actors will not appear for any promotional interviews.

Worried about not receiving a fair share of a streaming-dominated future and fed up with seeing exorbitant pay for entertainment moguls, actors have joined 11,500 striking screenwriters who walked out in May over similar concerns. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) is a major strike issue for both.



Actors and writers have not been on strike together since 1960. The last SAG strike occurred in 1980 and lasted for three months.

Actors & Screenwriters Face Tough Times

Just before the SAG Board voted to authorize a strike, Fran Drescher, the star and creator of the 1990s sitcom “The Nanny” and union president, explained that the membership had no choice but to strike:

“From the time negotiations began on June 7, the members of our Negotiating Committee and our staff team have spent many long days, weekends and holidays working to achieve a deal that protects you, the working actors, and performers on whom this industry relies. As you know, over the past decade, your compensation has been severely eroded by the rise of the streaming

ecosystem. Furthermore, artificial intelligence poses an existential threat to creative professions, and all actors and performers deserve contract language that protects them from having their identity and talent exploited without consent and pay. Despite our team's dedication to advocating on your behalf, 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."

The arrogance of the top executives was on full display two days before the strike began. The chief executive of Disney, Robert Iger, received a two-year contract extension at \$27 million per year. He then went on business media to blast the actors union for striking for higher compensation.

Meanwhile most working actors live paycheck to paycheck and have few benefits. Health insurance requires earning at least \$26,470 over a Covered Base Earning Period and excludes wages from part-time jobs. One actor interviewed on the picket line said he was dropped from his health insurance coverage for being short \$50.

Who Needs Creative Products?

The major studios don't create the movies and television shows that the public enjoys. Like all industries, it's the workers who create the shows. Without them, there is no Hollywood.

Of course, the attitude of the big studios is the same as in other major industries: The only way to please Wall Street is to increase stock values by stiffing writers and actors.

It's only mega stars like Tom Cruise or Nicole Kidman who have the power to negotiate high-paying contracts. Lesser-known actors and others on the production team are dependent on what the unions can get the studio bosses to accept in contract negotiations.

SAG says it is trying to ensure living wages for workaday actors and protect members from having their likenesses used in productions in which they took no part. The studios, which released a list of proposals they offered the actors, maintain that they have worked to reach a reasonable deal at a time when the industry has been upended by the growth of streaming services and faced shrinking viewership and lower box office returns.

The last time actors and screenwriters were on strike together was when Marilyn Monroe was starring in films. It was a different industry then. Today's dual strikes pit more than 170,000 workers against old-line studios like Disney, Universal, Sony and Paramount, as well newer juggernauts like Netflix, Amazon, and Apple. The stakes are high as the industry moguls seek to introduce new technology at the expense of its workforce. (See interview with Howard A. Rothman on the writers' strike [\[1\]](#).)

Without an agreement on how to use AI, writers might be rewriting scripts AI drafted while working actors find their voices and facial outlines used over and over with ridiculously small residual checks — or no check at all. The same technology is being introduced into other industries.

As Drescher noted, "What's happening to us is happening across all fields of labor. When employers make Wall Street and greed their priority and they forget about the essential contributors who make the machine run, we have a problem."

P.S.

- Against the Current:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/actors-walk-the-picket-lines/>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc225/the-writers-guild-strike/>