

Olivia Pitten

The “End” of Hollywood? New IATSE Deal Highlights Power of Unionization

Throughout history, a key feature of Hollywood’s business landscape has been the presence of unions. While many other industries felt considerable decline in worker union density, the entertainment industry has consistently remained active in unionization. This is likely due to the infeasibility of individuals negotiating with large, prominent studios on their own. Unions remove this barrier and provide a way for Hollywood performers and production crew to have consistent, reliable protections across various projects. The resulting collective bargaining agreements with producers create consistency across the ever-changing entertainment industry.¹ One entertainment union has recently made headlines by threatening a strike amidst futile renegotiates for more equitable workplace protections.

The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) is a group representing major producers and studios including Disney, Warner Bros., and Netflix.² As the “entertainment industry’s official collective bargaining representative,” the AMPTP negotiates agreements with unions covering employment terms and conditions, such as wages, hours and exclusivity.³

There are multiple large unions that represent workers throughout the entertainment industry. The 2012 merger between the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (now known as SAG-AFTRA), created a collective body of over 150,000 members.⁴ While SAG-AFTRA represents on-screen talent, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) has been deemed “the union behind entertainment,” representing crew members across film, television, broadcast and concert production.⁵

When the COVID-19 pandemic halted the vast majority of film and television production, many members of Hollywood production crews found themselves empty-handed. Production members typically work on a gig-basis, working on a variety of different projects throughout the year.⁶ Without a steady salary from one studio, production crew members rely on their union representation from IATSE to negotiate livable wages and provide benefits.

As film and television production began to pick up again, behind-the-scenes crew members found themselves working long production hours and receiving low wages in return, specifically from increasingly popular streaming services.⁷ Following months of futile

¹ <https://www.epi.org/publication/how-todays-unions-help-working-people-giving-workers-the-power-to-improve-their-jobs-and-unrig-the-economy/>.

² <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-07-30/netflix-joins-hollywood-studio-producers-alliance>.

³ <https://www.amptp.org/index.html>.

⁴ <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/sag-aftra-merger-passes-sag-306398/>.

⁵ <https://iatse.net/about/>.

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/10/16/iatse-hollywood-agreement-strike/>.

⁷ <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-10-14/hollywood-crews-strike-iatse-what-you-need-to-know>.

negotiations surrounding a potential contract renewal, IATSE leadership proposed a strike in protest.⁸

In a historic move, an overwhelming 98% of IATSE members voted to authorize the union's first strike.⁹ The national strike was set to begin on Monday, October 18, 2021.¹⁰ But over last weekend, AMPTP and IATSE reached a deal to avoid the unprecedented strike. The new deal provides workers with "reasonable rest periods; meal breaks; a living wage for those on the bottom of the pay scale; and significant increases in compensation to be paid by new-media companies."¹¹

"This is a Hollywood ending," said IATSE President Matthew Loeb, in a statement following the narrowly averted strike, "Our members stood firm. We are tough and united."¹²

While the negotiations avoided an impending strike, the new deal will still require member ratification before it will go into effect. IATSE released a 4-phase ratification timeline on their Twitter page, depicting the road ahead.¹³ Once the specific language of the deal has been reviewed and finalized, local union leadership will distribute the proper information and select a date for the official ratification vote.

Summary:

This month, IATSE membership overwhelmingly voted to authorize the union's first strike to protest employment conditions for behind-the-scenes crew members. Last weekend, IATSE and AMPTP reached a deal to avoid a strike and implement more reasonable breaks, hours, and wages.

Bio:

Olivia Pitten is from Melbourne Beach, Florida, interested in corporate transactional work. She plans to begin her legal career in Dallas, Texas, after graduation.

⁸ <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-10-14/hollywood-crews-strike-iatse-what-you-need-to-know>.

⁹ <https://iatse.net/by-a-nearly-unanimous-margin-iatse-members-in-tv-and-film-production-vote-to-authorize-a-nationwide-strike/>.

¹⁰ <https://iatse.net/strike-date-set-for-60000-film-and-television-workers/>.

¹¹ <https://iatse.net/landmark-tentative-agreement-reached-for-iatse-west-coast-film-and-television-workers-before-strike-deadline/>.

¹² <https://iatse.net/landmark-tentative-agreement-reached-for-iatse-west-coast-film-and-television-workers-before-strike-deadline/>.

¹³ <https://twitter.com/IATSE/status/1450933152130736130>.