

The Hollywood Strike for Dummies

Vulture, by Jason Frank, November 9, 2023

Have you heard about streaming? Well, if not, know that it's the invasive species of the scripting world — throttling the competition and harmful to the ecosystem if unregulated. Because of changes to the entertainment environment due to streaming, the writers and actors went on strike. The writers' strike ended in September, while the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) strike lasted through November 9. After 146 days on strike, WGA members received an email on September 24 telling them that the WGA had reached a "tentative" agreement with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). Then, on October 9, the membership of the WGA overwhelmingly voted to ratify that contract, with 99 percent of membership voting "yes," bringing the WGA strike to a complete end. SAG, meanwhile, ended its strike upon reaching a tentative agreement on November 8, with the strike officially ending the next day at 12:01 a.m. The strike talk began months earlier, on April 3, when the WGA asked its writers to vote on authorizing a strike, and, on the 17th, it was officially announced that members had voted to authorize with an 97.85 percent "yes" vote. When the deadline for a new contract passed on May 1, the threat of a writers strike, which was looming over Hollywood for some time, transitioned from "looming" to "here."

"It's a very regular-degular, working-class existence," Alex O'Keefe, a writer for FX's *The Bear*, told *The New Yorker* about his work right before the strike. "And the only future I'm seeking financially is to enter that middle class, which has always been rarified for someone who comes from poverty ... I thought we would be treated more like collaborators on a product. It's like an assembly line now." While working on the show, his small Brooklyn apartment had no heat and the space heater blew fuses, forcing him to work from a public library. When the show won the WGA Award for Comedy Series, O'Keefe had a negative amount in his bank account and bought his tuxedo on credit. Below, a guide to Hollywood's 2023 strike, from beginning to end.

Why was Hollywood on strike?

On March 14, the WGA released a report titled "Writers Are Not Keeping Up." It detailed how compensation for writing has been negatively impacted by the advent (and takeover) of streaming. "On TV staffs, more writers are working at minimum regardless of experience, often for fewer weeks, or in mini-rooms, while showrunners are left without a writing staff to complete the season," the report states. "And while series budgets have soared over the past decade, median writer-producer pay has fallen." It points to an increase in writers working for the Minimum Basic Agreement across the board in roles ranging from staff writers (98 percent of whom now work for the MBA minimum — up 12 percent from the 2013–14 season) to showrunners (49 percent are at the minimum — up 16 percent). In overall terms, the percentage of TV writers working for the MBA minimum increased from a third in 2013–14 to nearly half of all writers in 2021–22.

This wasn't the only issue presented, of course. (Lorde said they would rue the day.) The report points to the fact that comedy-variety shows on streaming "have refused basic MBA protections — minimums for scripts and weeklies — for comedy-variety writers when they work on streaming series, even though episodic writers working for the same companies have those minimum standards." Additionally, regarding the feature-film girlies, the WGA points out that, when you adjust for inflation, "screen pay has declined 14% in the last five years." So those were the issues. But what did writers do about it? The WGA demanded increased minimum compensation in all areas of media, increased residuals, appropriate TV series-writing compensation from pre- to postproduction, increased contributions to pension and health plans, the strengthening of professional standards and the overall protections for writers, and more.

On the actors' side of the strike, which is still ongoing, quite a few of the actors' and the writers' demands have similarities, as SAG's original, rejected contract lays out. Both needed an increased MBA, with SAG asking for an 11 percent increased minimum in year one and 4 percent in each of the following years. The actors are also looking for increased residuals due to the general impact that streaming has had on the often primary source of actors' incomes. Kimiko Glenn, of *Orange Is the New Black*, shared a video featuring a check for \$27.30 to show the need for an increase in residuals for streaming shows.

One aspect of the SAG strike not on the WGA's list is SAG's interest in creating rules regarding self-tape auditions, which are auditions that actors must film at home at their own expense. During the pandemic, they became industry standard, but many actors are paying large amounts of money out of pocket to have their auditions taped professionally with no guarantee of it getting them a job. The AMPTP did offer to provide "guidelines" for the self-tapes, but the guidelines would be unenforced, which means the economic pressures could persist.

When did the WGA strike start?

A strike has been in the air since February, when the L.A. Times reported that both writers and studios were prepping for a potential walkout. The WGA put a "pattern of demands" up for a vote by WGA members on February 27, which included complaints about the "abuse of mini-rooms" (in which fewer writers are given less time to write shows), standardized compensation for feature and streaming films, and commensurate compensation to combat the issues mentioned above. Then, on March 7, 98.4 percent of WGA members voted to approve the demands, so negotiators could bring them to the table in negotiations with the AMPTP, according to *Variety*.

David Young, chief negotiator for the WGA, left for medical reasons and was replaced by Ellen Stutzman at the beginning of March. Young, whom Matthew Belloni of *Puck* referred to, at the time of his departure, as "controversial," led the WGA through the 2007–8 strike and, as Belloni noted, is "fiery" and "feared." "Nobody does anything in Hollywood unless they're afraid," he wrote. "And he's set a fear-based tone and cadence, if not the actual agenda, for these negotiations."

Three days before negotiations began, on March 17, Pitch Perfect and Blockers writer Kay Cannon released a video on behalf of herself and other WGA-side negotiators about what would happen once negotiations began. “There may be rumors or leaks to the press about what is going on in that room,” Cannon said, speaking to fellow members of the WGA. “Take these with a grain of salt. They are likely coming from the studios and are intended to scare or distract you and to undermine our strength at the table.”

After the strike was officially announced, both sides put out documents detailing how negotiations went on both sides of the discussion. The WGA’s detailed multiple times in which the AMPTP “rejected” their proposal outright, including on issues like weekly pay for feature writers, AI on MBA-covered projects, and on viewership-based streaming residuals. In other places, the WGA reported that AMPTP countered but not to the point where a compromise could be reached, as on the increased weekly rates of staff writers and story editors/executive story editors and on general minimums.

The AMPTP, meanwhile, put out a document countering with why they couldn’t fulfill the WGA’s requests. Their reasoning included arguments that minimum staffing “quotas” are antithetical to the creative process, that “the first-year general wage increase currently on the table is the highest first-year increase offered to the WGA in more than 25 years,” and that they are offering to “a lot more discussion” of AI moving forward.

Have they reached a deal?

They sure have. On September 24, the WGA announced that they had reached a tentative agreement with the AMPTP. Upon announcement, the guild called the deal “exceptional with meaningful gains and protections for writers.” The Memorandum of Agreement with the AMPTP has been completed and now, the negotiating committee will send it to union members to vote on whether or not to ratify the contract. The voting took place from October 2-9 and ended with the WGA membership in almost universal support of the deal — 99 percent of its members voted to ratify the contract.

How did WGA negotiations go?

Negotiations between the WGA and the AMPTP began on March 20. The intent was for them to last two weeks before taking a two-week break. On the last day of initial negotiations, March 31, Deadline reported that there was a proposal for the two sides to talk during the scheduled break, calling this a “significant step in the negotiations” and noting that sources had told the outlet that “there seems to be a willingness to keep discussions going, in some form, after some common ground was found between the WGA and AMPTP.”

Puck, however, disputed this positive version of events, calling it a “smokescreen,” harkening back to Cannon’s comments about the press. “A well-informed and impartial source, albeit from outside the room, tells me that the report’s spin was ‘nonsense’ and the alleged movement is a ‘charade,’” Jonathan Handel wrote in Puck. He claimed that the negotiations were mostly made up of the two sides reading speeches at each other rather than discussing matters. A

source told him, “It truly seems like they just want to strike and have no intention of coming to a deal.”

Negotiations concluded on Monday, May 1, without an agreement, leading to a strike. The first positive news coming from either of the strikes arrived on August 1, when AMPTP president Carole Lombardini reached out to the WGA to restart negotiations. The news was shared to writers via email and the WGA’s social media. Specifically, Lombardini requested a meeting on Friday, August 4, to restart negotiations. On August 11, the writers were presented with a counteroffer and, on August 22, went in for a meeting with Bob Iger, Donna Langley, Ted Sarandos, David Zaslav, and Carol Lombardini. To hear the WGA’s telling of the meeting, they were “met with a lecture about how good their single and only counteroffer was” rather than a negotiation.

Within the AMPTP’s shared document, there are notable points of compromise, as well as points of stubbornness regarding the WGA’s requests. Minimums were given an increase, though not as much as the WGA would have liked, the AMPTP was willing to give writers a ten-week minimum employment, and was willing to guarantee at least two mid-level writers per show, while the WGA requested six. Perhaps the most surprising offer, given streaming’s unwillingness to share streaming data, was that the WGA would be given quarterly reports on hours watched. Regarding AI, the studios limited their offer to saying that, “Written material produced by GAI will not be considered literary material,” and that it would not affect the writers’ “compensation, credit, and separated rights.” This means that writers’ work could still be used to train generative AI.

Apparently, within 20 minutes of the meeting’s end, the AMPTP’s counteroffer was leaked to the press, which the WGA called “the companies’ plan from the beginning — not to bargain, but to jam us. It is their only strategy — to bet that we will turn on each other.”

On August 25, the WGA followed up this statement with an email to its members, detailing why the studios’ counteroffer was not sufficient to end the strike. “The companies’ counteroffer is neither nothing, nor nearly enough,” it wrote, according to The Hollywood Reporter. “We will continue to advocate for proposals that fully address our issues rather than accept half measures like those mentioned above and other proposals not listed here.” The WGA reiterated its stance that companies could afford its demands and pointed out ways that the seemingly large compromises were actually small. On the topic of sharing data, for instance, the WGA wrote that “the companies say they have made a major concession by offering to allow six WGA staff to study limited streaming viewership data for the next three years, so we can return in 2026 to ask once again for a viewership-based residual.” However, “in the meantime, no writer can be told by the WGA about how well their project is doing, much less receive a residual based on that data.” The WGA also pointed out that many writers (such as game-show writers and daytime writers) were still not included under new and broadened MBA terms.

And how about SAG negotiations?

With the SAG strike over November 9, the long national nightmare of not having actors on talk shows (and also no filming of new shows and actors being out of work for months) is officially over. "In a contract valued at over one billion dollars, we have achieved a deal of extraordinary scope that includes 'above-pattern' minimum compensation increases, unprecedented provisions for consent and compensation that will protect members from the threat of AI, and for the first time establishes a streaming participation bonus," SAG said in a statement. "Our Pension & Health caps have been substantially raised, which will bring much needed value to our plans. In addition, the deal includes numerous improvements for multiple categories including outsize compensation increases for background performers, and critical contract provisions protecting diverse communities."

Progress truly got underway a few weeks before, on October 21, when SAG and the AMPTP put out a joint press statement saying negotiations would resume on October 24, according to the New York Times. On October 29, SAG announced to its members that both they and the AMPTP would take October 30 off from negotiations. "Over the course of the weekend, we have discussed all open proposals, including AI, with the AMPTP," SAG said in an email, according to Deadline. It continued: "Both parties will be working independently Monday and re-engage on scheduling at the end of the day. Join us and flood picket lines in the morning. Make your voices heard." The California economy is estimated to have lost \$5 billion, so the strike's ending will allow a full awards season to get going (with both the Emmys and the Oscars to come this winter) and the final gasps of fall TV will be able to run.

SAG's contract was initially up on July 1, but discussions were extended through to July 12. Then on July 13, after the discussions were no longer tenable, Nanny and SAG President Fran Drescher announced the strike in a thrilling speech showing why actors make frightening opponents in the press. "I cannot believe it, quite frankly, how far apart we are on so many things," Drescher said in her speech. "How they plead poverty, that they're losing money left and right, while giving hundreds of millions of dollars to their CEOs. It is disgusting. Shame on them. They stand on the wrong side of history at this very moment." She additionally shed some light on how negotiations were going prior to the strike. "I went in in earnest, thinking we that would be able to avert a strike," she said, later adding. "In earnest, we gave them an extension of 12 days, which they absolutely wasted, making us feel like we'd been duped. Maybe it was just to let studios promote their summer movies another 12 days. They stayed locked behind closed doors; they continued to cancel our meetings with them. We thought, Well, maybe they're really getting into it, but then what we ultimately received from them was what my mom would call 'a leck and a schmeck.'"

SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP resumed talks October 2, but the AMPTP walked away October 11. Lead negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland told The Hollywood Reporter that "It is mystifying to me why they think that is a way to move this process forward." Crabtree-Ireland said the guild made huge concessions on streaming revenues and had made a counterproposal on AI, yet the AMPTP decided to leave the negotiating table yet again. They returned to the table on October

24. Two days later, on October 26, thousands of SAG-AFTRA members, including Alan Cumming, Cynthia Nixon, and Lucas Hedges, put out an open letter. “We have not come all this way to cave now,” it reads. “We have not gone without work, without pay, and walked picket lines for months just to give up on everything we’ve been fighting for. We cannot and will not accept a contract that fails to address the vital and existential problems that we all need fixed.”

On November 4, following nearly two weeks of negotiating, SAG released a statement reading, “We received an offer today from the AMPTP which they characterized as their ‘Last, Best, and Final Offer.’ We are reviewing it and considering our response within the context of the critical issues addressed in our proposals.” Deliberations are currently ongoing, with negotiations beginning again on November 6. “This is a very good deal for them; they’ve gotten almost everything they’ve wanted, and they came back for more,” a source on the AMPTP’s side told THR. The source said the current deal is “worth more than three of the last deals put together,” and that if the deal is not reached by the weekend of November 11 or the following week, “it means we’re finished.”

What was everyone saying about strike authorization?

Notable Hollywood names have taken to Twitter to voice their support for strike authorization in both guilds. “It’s about writers getting their fair share,” Daniel Kwan wrote on Twitter. “It’s about maintaining a healthy middle/working class of writers in our industry. It’s about showing our collective strength as new tech threatens to take away our leverage.”

But this Oscar winner isn’t the only one expressing support. Other writers of hit TV shows and films — Adele Lim (*Crazy Rich Asians*), Ashley Nicole Black (*Ted Lasso*, *A Black Lady Sketch Show*), Justin Halpern (*Harley Quinn*, *Abbott Elementary*), Jeffrey Lieber (*Lost*), Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson (*Yellowjackets*), and many more — have expressed support for their union.

Members of SAG-AFTRA supported their strike prior to it becoming a reality, with the support of a cavalcade of celebrities from Meryl Streep to J. Law to Brendan Fraser. More than 300 celebrities signed a letter to SAG leadership on June 28 saying, “We hope you’ve heard the message from us: This is an unprecedented inflection point in our industry, and what might be considered a good deal in any other years is simply not enough,” among other things.

What shows and films were most affected by the strikes?

When WGA went on strike, late-night shows were one of the first to be writer-less first. *Saturday Night Live* and all the talk shows were also caught out in the cold. (For what it’s worth, that might be why James Corden’s last day on *The Late Late Show* is scheduled for April 27.)

After that, many of the most popular network shows were on break for the summer, but then couldn’t come back in the fall, as they typically start writing in the summer. *Abbott Elementary*, you in danger, girl. You can find a full list of shows and films that were paused or shutdown by the WGA strike and SAG strike [here](#).

Streaming is kind of a different story. Remember how we said that streaming caused lots of changes to the industry? Well, these strikes were definitely not ideal for them, but streamers often have shows banked for a pretty long time, so they'll be able to tide audiences over for a while — I mean, the trailer for HBO's *The Sympathizer* adaptation came out on April 12, and that show isn't coming until sometime in 2024. These strikes might force them to focus on more international shows or just parcel out what they already have more slowly. Just like there's no precedent for how streaming has changed TV, there's no precedent for how a strike can change what streamers' content looks like.

For SAG, the absence of actors was most felt on red carpets and during promotion cycles for big summer blockbusters. That's why the *Oppenheimer* London premiere was cut short and why only Mickey and Minnie attended Disney's *Haunted Mansion* premiere. Reality TV shows and industries outside of SAG and WGA, such as music, podcasts, and books, remained unaffected. Interestingly, the wild world of influencers and content creators was impacted by the strike, too, as some influencers are a part of SAG.

Some projects, like a few A24 films, were granted interim agreements, meaning SAG actors were allowed to work on those projects as they are not affiliated with the AMPTP.

Strikes make a comeback in America

CNN, September 16, 2023, by Nathaniel Meyersohn

The United Auto Workers strike isn't happening in a vacuum. It's part of a growing movement of US workers walking off the job.

From Hollywood writers to nurses, factory workers, and Starbucks baristas, thousands of workers have gone on strike in recent months to demand higher pay and improved benefits and working conditions. The Teamsters union recently used the threat of a strike by 340,000 members at UPS to secure most of their demands, including pay raises and new air conditioned vans.

Labor has become more aggressive because of decades of stagnant wages for lower and middle-income workers, while the richest Americans expanded their wealth to unprecedented levels. Corporate profits have soared since the pandemic, and workers want a greater piece of the profits.

"There's a generational change taking place in the labor movement and its thinking," said Joseph McCartin, a labor historian at Georgetown University.

Between 1979 and 2022, the inflation-adjusted annual wages of the top 1% of workers rose by 145%, while the average annual wages of the bottom 90% rose by only 16% — about a tenth as fast, according to the Economic Policy Institute. Several factors contributed to these trends, including deregulation, the decline of unions, and little change in the federal minimum wage.

The auto workers, for example, are taking aim at CEO compensation at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis — which has grown by more than 40% over the last four years — to press their case for worker wage increases.

Workers also believe they have more bargaining power due to a tight labor market and the strongest public support for unions in decades.

"We're living through a strong labor market and economy, and workers and unions feel more leverage when economic forces are blowing in the direction they have been," McCartin said.

Workers gained power during the pandemic as Covid-19 cast a spotlight on essential workers' sacrifices and the vast disparities among America's workforce.

Unemployment is at a near-decades low and employers are posting more job openings than there are unemployed job seekers. That gives workers some leverage to demand more of what they want.

Approval of labor unions is also at its highest point since 1965, according to Gallup. The majority of the public sees unions as key to improving pay and working conditions. Unionized workers earn on average 10.2% more in wages than non-unionized peers.

“Today’s striking workers may have a stronger hand in their negotiations than they would have had in the past given today’s elevated public support for unions,” Gallup said in a news release.

Strikes below historical levels

But despite the growing number of strikes, America still sees 70% fewer strikes now compared to the early 1970s, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Union membership has also declined dramatically as some states placed barriers against unions through so-called “right to work” laws. Those laws allow workers to opt out of paying fees to a union at their workplace, even if they benefit from union bargaining agreements. Union membership has also declined as some companies have presented fierce opposition to unions. And unions have never organized workers at some companies such as car maker Tesla and steel maker Nucor that fend off unions by paying workers higher wages.

In a watershed moment in the decline of unions, 13,000 members of the federal air traffic controllers union walked off the job in 1981 and were fired by President Ronald Reagan and replaced. The labor confrontation had a chilling effect on unions. Meanwhile, Reagan enjoyed support from some unions, such as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, both in 1980 and 1984 elections.

The union membership rate peaked in 1945 at 33.4% of the workforce, EPI said. In 1985, 18% of the workforce was unionized.

Last year, 10.1% of US workers were unionized.

“Coming out of the Reagan era, union leaders were in retreat and looking to get along with management,” McCartin said. Companies learned how to use strikes to weaken unions and they became less common.

But the labor movement has become more assertive.

During the past year through September 13, unions launched 396 strikes across the United States, similar to the 409 recorded the year prior, according to a Cornell University Institute of Labor Relations database.

The number of workers involved in major work stoppages hit the highest levels in decades in the years before the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in 2018 and 2019. After subsiding during the pandemic, the number of workers who went on strike grew by 50% in 2022, according to a report by the Economic Policy Institute.

The election of UAW President Shawn Fain, a more combative leader than his predecessors who frequently blasts the “billionaire class,” reflected this shift.

Fain and UAW leadership are taking a different approach to negotiations with the three major US automakers. The UAW in previous contracts dating back to 2007 to 2009 gave significant

concessions to automakers. At the time, years of losses and a global financial crisis had left the companies on their way to bankruptcy and federal bailouts.

In past negotiations, the union has sometimes chosen only one automaker to strike, while staying on the job at the other two. Once a deal was reached, the union moved to get the other automakers to accept that “pattern” as the basis for their own contract.

But Fain and UAW have announced a targeted strike plan at key plants at all three automakers.

“It’s a significant innovation,” McCartin said. “It’s part of how labor leadership has gotten smarter and more militant.”