

Crunch time for striking US actors

By Peter Bowes
BBC News, Los Angeles

After two years of turmoil, Hollywood may be about to turn its back on a bleak period of industrial strife and inaction on the sets.

Screen actors are being asked to vote on a new contract, which is a year overdue.

It has been thrashed out by their union's top brass in the hope of averting another damaging strike in the entertainment business.

Ballot papers will be sent out to the Screen Actors Guild's (SAG) 120,000 members on Tuesday.

"It's a very good deal for our members," says Ned Vaughn, a SAG board member.

"It's the result of a year of tough bargaining and it gets us more work, more pay and better benefits."

"It's important to get the members back to work and this will help do it," he adds.

The main sticking points have revolved around the money actors receive when their work is made available on the internet.

It is generally accepted that in the future more and more people will view TV shows and movies on their computer.

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Marcia Smith, Screen Actors Guild Foundation,

The actors have long felt that they should receive a larger slice of the profits when their images are used in new media.

The new deal gives actors a 6.5% pay increase over the life of the contract. But, significantly, it also acknowledges the role of new media.

"In many respects it's a landmark contract," says Mr Vaughn.

"We are getting jurisdiction for the first time in many areas of new media.

"We are going finally to be paid when our work is seen on streaming sites."

But, according to some union members, the devil is in the detail. The last few weeks have seen demonstrations outside the Guild's headquarters by actors opposed to the new contract.

"I think they are union busting proposals," says Scott Wilson, who has appeared in more than 70 films, including the Oscar winner, *In the Heat of the Night*, in 1967.

Support actors

One of the objections to the contract arises from a clause that allows TV programmes to be streamed on the internet, without royalties being paid to actors, for 17-24 days.

"We are going to lose a huge percentage of our income as traditional television primetime reruns go over to the internet.

"There we will receive a tiny fraction of what we used to receive on the traditional television residual," explains David Clennon, a veteran actor whose credits include *Grey's Anatomy* and *Boston Legal*.

"It's important to realise that these contracts are not for the high profile superstars," adds Mr Wilson.

"These contract negotiations are about the people who support those people.

"The professional stunt people who make the heroes out of the stars and the supporting actors who add texture and quality to films."

Supporters of the new contract believe the Guild has secured a flexible framework for actors to renegotiate their pay, as new media develops.

"As we start looking at what seems to be the new model and the ways that we're all going to be working and earning their living, there'll be new technology over the next few years that will change the terrain yet again," says Adam Arkin, known for the '90s medical drama *Chicago Hope*.

Actors on both sides of the argument agree they need to get back to work.

'Disaster'

Hollywood is in the doldrums and many performers have become so impoverished they have turned to the Screen Actors Guild Foundation, a non-profit group that helps performers get a foothold in the industry.

It also provides financial assistance when they hit hard times.

"It has been a disaster," says Marcia Smith, the Foundation's executive director.

Ms Smith explains that the combined effect of the writers' strike, the prolonged actors' pay negotiations and the recession has been like a "perfect storm" for Hollywood.

"Most actors don't have safety nets. They don't have savings. They really live from month to month. And so when you're out of work for three months, everything really starts collapsing," she explains.

Over the past two years the Foundation has been inundated with pleas for help and is currently 30% over budget.

It relies on fundraising events and donations to survive.

A "yes" vote to the new contract is likely to result in more TV and movie projects getting off the ground.

But many so-called jobbing actors see little light at the end of the tunnel.

"The number of roles has been cut in half," says Timothy Starks.

"Many people have not been to an audition in three months - actors who're used to going to an audition every week."

Some actors are giving up the business altogether. They say a profession that involves chasing a dream is no longer worth it.

"Ten years ago you saw light at the end of the tunnel, right now you see the light flicker on and off.

"The excitement has gone a little bit, it's a little scary," says Mr Starks, who has appeared on Friends and Arrested Development.

The ballot papers are due to be returned by 9 June, when the result will be announced.

"Many actors haven't yet come to the realisations that the industry is not what it was five years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago," says Ms Smith.

"This is a whole new world of technology. It's a whole new world of what acting and being in a performance means and we need to look ahead."

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