

## **This Isn't a Country Club**

AFTRA, like the rest of the labor movement, is in crisis. Our very survival is at stake. This is not simply because powerful corporate forces are out to destroy us (which they are), but in large part because we haven't got our act together.

I think there is a definite perception among the general public – most of whom are working people and support the concept of organized labor – that unions are “special interests,” not really concerned with the welfare of most of the nation's workforce. Instead, unions in general, and the AFL-CIO in particular, appear to be interested protecting their own inflated wages and fat contracts, and in hob-nobbing in their good-old-boy club and playing politics in smoke-filled rooms. This is an image put forward by our corporate opponents and rather gleefully touted in the media. It is, in most cases, absolutely false, and we need to do whatever we can to counter that disinformation.

Unfortunately however, there are times when the perception of a union as a closed, elite society is true. You will recall the joint AFTRA-SAG meeting in January, when we voted to ratify the new primetime/theatrical contract, and the howl that went up from one faction of Hollywood SAG over the “launch” provision. It was quite a performance! People decried this concession as a terrible betrayal, and the beginning of the end of our unions. They called for a rejection of the whole contract, to strike if we have to, blah, blah, yadda-yadda-yadda. Before they actually started singing “The Internationale,” one of these people mentioned that a leading actor might possibly lose \$10,000 in residual payments. THAT'S what they were willing to strike over: enormous payments to a very few people (who are already prominent in the industry and have no doubt negotiated handsome salaries). They were completely unimpressed that the whole point of the “launch” provision was to create MORE SESSION FEES for average working actors -- who, by the way, WOULD NOT forgo residual payments! I haven't heard anything about this experiment, whether or not more work is being created. We'll see. But the attitude of those SAG folks sends precisely the wrong message – that the union is indeed in the business of looking out for a greedy, overpaid elite.

But SAG doesn't have a monopoly on bad guys. It seems that time after time, year after year, contract after contract, a few high earners have bullied AFTRA into preserving a Non-Broadcast contract that favors only that tiny elite. It's true that our non-union opponents have captured an enormous amount of our work by lying about the union to potential employers, but our outmoded Non-Broadcast contract itself has also contributed to the near-death of an industry that once provided a good livelihood for many AFTRAns.

There is another thing about our union that contributes to the perception that we're an elite. Our initiation fee is completely absurd. It looks more like the initiation fee for a country club than a union. No wonder young performers are reluctant to join AFTRA. My own daughter, Katie, is starting out as an actor, having landed two roles at Equity theatres. She's joining the Equity Membership Candidate program, and she's anxious to see what lies in store for a possible professional career. But when it comes to AFTRA

work, I don't know what to tell her. I hesitate to say that she should plunk down thirteen hundred dollars to join an organization that can't guarantee her anything, and represents a rapidly declining portion of the industry. Now, she'd never do scab work – she's been raised right. But it breaks my heart to think that she might never be able to do the kind of AFTRA work that gave her dad a decent income and provided her and her sister with health insurance the whole time they were growing up.

And from my experience talking with young performers, Katie is not alone. Most of the “pre-union” folks we've met at various meetings express a genuine respect and admiration for AFTRA, and a willingness, even eagerness, to join. But when faced with that huge initiation fee, they're put off, and the perception grows that the union, by keeping new people out with exorbitant entry fees, is in the business of looking out for the already wealthy. Many of them feel that their only choice is to work non-union.

But, you say, shouldn't we have a high initiation fee, to insure that our members are serious enough about their careers to make such a substantial investment in it? Don't we WANT to be something of an elite, telling potential employers that a union card means a quality performer? Yeah, right. Been there, done that, tried it for years, it doesn't work. And it's not even true. Think of all those talented young performers who can't afford to join AFTRA and who are out there working non-union in the booth and in the studio every day and getting lots of experience. (Union auditions are now so few and far between that I've heard that casting directors are saying that union performers are looking rusty in their auditions.)

**WE'RE A UNION, NOT A COUNTRY CLUB!** We need to show that we do care about ALL workers in our industry by making it possible for ALL workers in our industry to be members. The recent rift in the AFL-CIO centers on this very issue of organizing and increased membership. Politics is important, to be sure. And AFTRA is at long last becoming more politically astute and active. But I side with the radicals: first and foremost, **IT'S ALL ABOUT MEMBERSHIP!** If we want to stop the loss of jobs to non-union, we need to dry up the non-union talent pool! We've seen some wonderfully creative efforts recently to try to organize non-broadcast employers -- and it hasn't worked. We need to organize the workers, not the employers. Let's go to those young “pre-union” performers and call their bluff. You say you'd like to join the union, but the fee is too high? OK, you can join for a hundred bucks. A hundred bucks now, and the dues are only about \$160 a year (tax-deductible), even if you never work. But you will work, if everyone joins. Nobody will be producing non-union work if everybody worth hiring is in the union!

And no, I haven't forgotten about broadcasters. In some ways, this \$100 initiation idea is even more exciting for them. It's been embarrassing to me to go to national AFTRA meetings, representing a traditionally solid union state, and to know that AFTRA represents so few of our broadcast outlets. We need to change that! **EVERY** broadcaster should be a member of AFTRA, even if they're not currently working at a union station. We should invite **ALL** broadcasters to join AFTRA, because here's what we can do: if the workers, even a minority of them, are already members of a union, they can go to the

employer and demand that the employer negotiate with them, and the employer is bound to do so! According to Professor Charles J. Morris in his new book *The Blue Eagle at Work*, this “minority unionism” is perfectly legal and was an important part of labor’s strategy in the 1930’s. We’ve gotten so used to the idea of lengthy, expensive NLRB elections (trying to organize the employer) that we’ve forgotten this part of labor law. It’s how a lot of industries were originally unionized – by organizing the WORKERS, not the employers!

And, by the way, we sell the union by stressing workplace issues, not benefits. Many non-union people have horror stories about not being paid on time, if ever, and having lousy working hours and conditions. The basic workplace issues of safe and sanitary conditions, fair and timely payment, and the availability of worker’s comp and unemployment insurance are what we should stress, plus the security of having the union at your back in any disputes with an employer. (We oversell health and retirement. Forget about it as a selling point. We should all be working in support of universal health care, anyway.)

It has been very discouraging to see how far our Twin Cities AFTRA membership has fallen. Ten years ago, we had nearly 1200 members. When I was President, membership had fallen below 1000. Today, it’s below 700 and still falling. We have to get more members, and removing the excessive initiation fee will help. I’d bet you a nickel that we’d get thirteen times as many new members as we do now with the sky-high initiation fee. This plan won’t solve all our problems, but it must be tried. And yes, it looks like a desperate move. Desperate action is called for. We are in crisis. Our survival is at stake.

Mark Bradley

PS: I’m now a member of the Steelworkers. Cost me 20 bucks.