

Actors' And Writers' Strikes Bring Chicago's Film Industry To A Halt: 'We're Fighting For The Survival Of Our Profession'

Cinespace is a "ghost town" with productions shut down. SAG-AFTRA and WGA are striking over low pay, a lack of transparency for residuals and the rise of artificial intelligence.



Clint Worthington 8:31 AM CDT on Jul 19, 2023



Credit: Jess Jones, SAG-AFTRA Chicago Staff
Members of the local Chicago chapter of SAG-AFTRA

CHICAGO — Actors and writers striking over low pay, a lack of transparency for residuals and streaming content and the looming specter of artificial intelligence have brought Chicago's film and TV productions to a standstill.

Late last week, SAG-AFTRA, the union representing film and TV actors, announced they would join the Writer's Guild of America in a joint strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers. It's the first joint strike between both guilds in 60 years.

While Los Angeles and New York are the epicenters of these labor movements, cities like Chicago are affected as well, as productions like "Chicago Med," "Chicago PD," and "The Chi" have stopped filming until the strike is resolved. "The Chi" was the last production in Chicago to be picketed, toward the beginning of the WGA strike, according to WGA captain Brett Neveu.

Both writers' and actors' guilds are demanding fairer compensation for their work, further protections for creatives in a landscape where streaming shows work on shorter seasons over longer periods of time and protections against the use of AI writing and likeness capture to supplant or completely replace their work.

"The studio execs have just made it really difficult to make a living in this industry," said local actor Courtney Rioux, a SAG-AFTRA member since 2010 who's now training to become a strike captain. "The whole business model has changed, and the contract has not pivoted with that change.

Rioux said people who worked on shows now streaming "aren't able to pay their bills, their rent."

"I'm fortunate to work on a network TV show, which is different than streaming. But any moment, my show could move over to streaming, and I wouldn't get compensated in the same way," she said.

SAG-AFTRA will host a solidarity walk and rally noon-3 p.m. Thursday Downtown. Union members and supporters will walk from Wrigley Square at Millennium Park, 201 E. Randolph St., starting at noon, to Buckingham Fountain, 301 S. Columbus Drive in Grant Park, where the rally is expected to begin at around 1:30 p.m.

No one knows quite when the strike will end, but SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher has indicated that the union is prepared for a months-long standstill, perhaps into 2024.

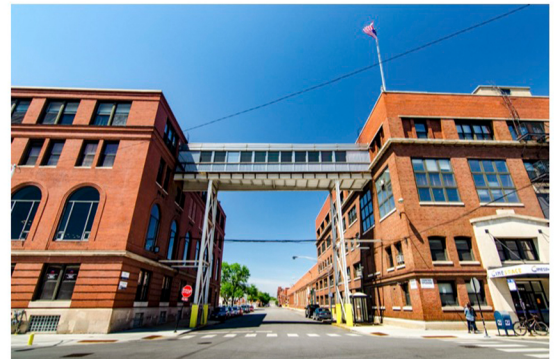
"The overwhelming sense is that this is a long time coming," said Michael B. Woods, a Chicago actor who has appeared on shows like FX's "The Bear" and "Power," in an interview with Block Club.

Fearing directors will bring in actors from New York and L.A., many actors in Chicago feel grateful to get any film or television work. Because of that, they don't feel emboldened to speak up about conditions: "You feel like, if you say that treating us this way is unjustified, you'll be pushed aside for somebody who won't bring that up."

The joint strike provides an opportunity to effectively advocate for better conditions, especially financial resources that actors need to perform their craft.

"It shouldn't be a big ask for the studios to provide that," Woods said.

But the strike isn't just affecting Chicago actors and writers; film and TV productions in the city also rely on tradespeople to build sets, rig lighting and do the day-to-day technical work required for filming.



Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

Cinespace film studios in North Lawndale.

One source told Block Club Cinespace, where many of the Dick Wolf Chicago TV series are filmed, is currently a "ghost town" and workers like the mechanics' union are having to find employment elsewhere. The Chicago Film Office could not be reached for comment.

"As of [the beginning of the WGA strike], there isn't work in Chicago for us," said one anonymous tradesperson who has worked on numerous Chicago film and TV productions, including FX's "The Bear." "The work coming in has all been pushed back because no one wants to rent stages and build, and then WGA pickets so they can't film."

This has led to complicated feelings about the strike for Chicago tradespeople, he said.

"Obviously we stand with the workers wanting more money and benefits from production," he said. "[Executives] make billions every year and we should see it make its way down the line."

But there is some tension over a perceived lack of solidarity between actors/writers and tradespeople, especially as the latter lose out on work and productions hire smaller crews in the aftermath.

"Unions should stand together to get what we feel we deserve," he said. "But [some tradespeople] think we never get anything out of these deals down the road, and we just lose out on a bunch of money we could be making."

Nonetheless, as the strike continues, various legs of Chicago labor are showing up in solidarity, Neveu said. For example, unions like SAG-AFTRA, the Teamsters, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, the Chicago Teachers Union and the Chicago Federation of Labor have been turning out for WGA pickets and strike events.

"Labor stands as one in its negotiations with the [AMPTP] and all union members are hoping for a resolution," Neveu said. "We love to work and very much want to get back to our projects! We first must be able to earn a fair share."

"A strike is always a somber moment," Rioux agreed. "But people are ready to fight, and people are rallying together ... We are fighting for the survival of our profession."