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SAG, AFTRA face deadline

Unions must decide soon if they are to negotiate together

By [DAVE MCNARY](#)

The Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television & Radio Artists are facing a looming deadline within the next few months if they're going to negotiate together on the primetime-feature contract with the majors.

The performers unions haven't yet taken any formal steps toward joint bargaining, even with SAG obligated to begin seven weeks of negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers on Oct. 1. The current SAG and AFTRA master contracts -- negotiated separately for the first time in three decades -- both expire on June 30, 2011.

AFTRA president Roberta Reardon has held informal discussions recently with SAG prexy Ken Howard about the issue. She admitted that a decision by AFTRA will probably be made before the end of the first quarter, given that both unions require several months for a "wages and working conditions" process of meetings with members to hammer out contract proposals prior to the start of bargaining.

"We've had a lot of internal discussion about joint negotiations but we haven't formalized anything," she told Daily Variety. "We would do it if it were something that's to the advantage of all our members."

SAG declined to comment on Reardon's statements.

Reardon noted that AFTRA's also facing looming expirations on two of its other major contracts -- sound recordings, which expires June 30; and network code, which ends on Nov. 15. The AFTRA netcode pact covers about \$400 million in annual earnings from dramatic programs in syndication or outside primetime, daytime serial dramas, gameshows, talkshows, variety and musical programs, news, sports, reality shows and promotional announcements.

"We have a little bit of a pileup in terms of scheduling," Reardon added.

She also said that no definitive steps have been taken toward a SAG-AFTRA merger, voted down by SAG members in 1999 and 2003, indicating that combining the unions remains a long-term goal. "I got into AFTRA politics eight years ago because I believe that performers should be in a single union, but if we're going to do that, we need to take the time to do it right," she added.

Relations between SAG and AFTRA hit a low early last year when AFTRA angrily split off from joint negotiations over jurisdiction and reached its own primetime deal. SAG -- which still hadn't shifted control to the moderates -- then blasted terms of the pact, which had a relatively low 62% ratification. With SAG not reaching a deal until a year later, AFTRA was able to sign up the lion's share of this year's TV pilots that were shot digitally.

In the fall of 2008, AFTRA and SAG agreed to a separate deal aimed at ending the bickering between the unions. Brokered by the AFL-CIO, the agreement included "nondisparagement" language along with fines and other discipline for violators; the unions then agreed to joint negotiations on the commercials contract and reached a new three-year deal with the ad industry last spring.

But the enmity toward AFTRA remains strong in some SAG quarters. Its Hollywood board passed a resolution in May to explore the "acquisition" of actors repped through AFTRA, leading to an AFL-CIO umpire warning SAG it would face "severe" fines for any further discussions of an "acquisition" and ordering the guild to officially disavow the statement.

SAG's Membership First faction, which controls the Hollywood board, staunchly opposes any merger and contends that SAG should represent all acting work. Howard campaigned as the head of the Unite For Strength ticket, which explicitly advocates combining the unions.

"We should merge to create a single powerful union that covers all the work we do, making it impossible for our employers to divide us," the faction has noted. "That's what Unite for Strength is all about."

SAG and AFTRA have shared jurisdiction over primetime series and the long-standing agreement has been that SAG reps all projects shot on film, while SAG and AFTRA have an equal shot at projects shot electronically. With more primetime skeins shot in high-def digital formats, AFTRA's electronic purview has greatly expanded in the past two years as nearly all primetime pilots went AFTRA.

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