

The Need for a Cultural Shift:
What Can Be Done to Improve the Working Conditions in the Film and Television Industry

by

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Introduction

“One day we will all look back and laugh at this after therapy, or a few years (Pretty Reel).” This statement from a production assistant encapsulates the feeling that many workers in the film and television industry have. It is an industry built on trauma bonding with your co-workers over the course of 18-hour days and impossible conditions. While everyone on a set is affected, the below the line workers are the ones on their feet for most of those hours, and expected to drive home, and do it all again tomorrow.

Society relies on media as a means of escape, and community. Especially with the isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic, many turned toward film and television to help them get through. While viewers are swept away into magical worlds, and the problems of fictional characters, the workers that bring the worlds to life are often forgotten. Many in the industry are resigned to their fate and push through weeks and months of 12-to-18-hour days. But with a recent uptick in fatalities from lack of safety and care when it comes to below the line workers, it is clearer than ever that something needs to change. In the film and television industry there are two kinds of workers: above the line and below the line. Above the line (ATL) workers “refer to those responsible for creative development, production, and direction of a film or TV show (Pruner).” Below the line (BTL) “refers to any production costs not included in the above the line portion of the budget (Pruner).” BTL positions cover most of the crew, actors with non-starring roles, staff writers, and really anyone lacking name recognition. Which side of the line you are on doesn’t refer to your importance on a project but rather where money is on a budget. ATL workers are usually paid at a fixed rate while BTL are paid hourly and don’t have any guarantee of employment. “BTL workers are not essential to a project, and they can be replaced at any time during production (Pruner).” This statement about below the line workers is

incredibly reductive and part of the problem when it comes to how people deemed “replaceable” are treated in the industry. Unions and producers must come together to create safer and more equitable working conditions for everyone who is involved with a production.

My background in theatre has exposed me to the necessity of taking care of everyone on a production, no matter their title or role. Before the pandemic hit, I was a Company Management Production Assistant on a 2nd national tour of a Broadway production. The entire Company Management team was the Company Manager, who was returning from eight years away from theatre to serve in the military, and myself. However, I was only hired for six weeks to help get the show running and up on the road. Within the first week, it became clear to me that the company manager’s sole focus was taking care of the actors. During long hours of tech, he would often forget to provide the crew their courtesy meals, even though they had been at the theater for 12 hours already. This crew was under a yellow International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Motion Picture Technicians (IATSE) contract, which should have provided them protections including meals, proper turn around between calls and breaks. After my contract ended, the conditions only worsened. There were weeks on end where the crew would only get sleep on the bus as they drove between theatres, expected to wake up after only a few hours of rest to load into a completely new space.

This experience sparked a curiosity and pain within me. I implicitly knew that above the line workers were often prioritized in productions but seeing the inequity clearly in front of me enraged me. As I transitioned from theatre to film, I found that the treatment of crew followed me over, and in many cases the crews on films were being treated even worse than theatrical crews. While the budgets were often higher, the hours were longer, the jobs more demanding, and the pay gap even larger. The more I researched and delved into the structure of the industry,

the more evident it became that it wasn't only the below the line workers being exploited, but almost everyone who was employed by a production.

While various unions that cover these employees are fighting for equity and better treatment, the corporations that run the industry are overpowering them. Corporations are exploiting the labor who make film and television happen. Changes are possible if we get the corporations to care about people and understand that by focusing on slower production timelines, and a work life balance for laborers, the content, consumer, laborers, and industry will benefit. With the writer's strike in process, the industry hangs in balance. Now is the time for change. Now is the time for corporations to understand that behind human capital are real people who want to tell stories that change the world. It is time that the corporations took a few simple steps to make the industry more equitable, safe, and sustainable.

Methodology

The state of the film and television industry is in constant flux, which makes studying it a particularly interesting challenge. To understand the industry as it is now, historical research must be conducted. Utilizing academic and popular sources, I traced the evolution of the industry from its inception to the current situation. With that context in mind, I focused on the structural foundations of the industry, in this case unions. By using the individual websites for each union, and sources such as Time Up's 'A Guide to the Union and Guilds,' I fostered a working understanding of the way these unions run the industry and interact with each other and the distribution companies.

The best way to research a current moment is through conducting primary source interviews with people working in the industry. I conducted eight formal interviews, mainly with Production Assistants, to learn about their experience of the industry. Production Assistants are

the bottom rung of a production, and often, are one of the few positions not covered by a union. They are the most exploited member of a production, but they often work within many different departments. This gives them a unique understanding and view of how a production runs. In addition to production assistants, I interviewed Production Coordinators and Cheyenne Cage, the founder of Stand with Production movement. Cage is actively in conversation with the existing unions and is working to create a new union under IATSE that covers commercial Production Departments and Production Assistants. Juxtaposing the stories of Production Assistants and Cage really helped unearth what is possible with collective bargaining and community.

Due to the ongoing nature of the writer's strike, and industry changes, industry trade publications have synthesized the information gathered from interviews and academic journals. Trades such as Deadline and Variety are closely following the strike, as well as other shifts within the industry. But the most important source of information has been Instagram, especially for on the ground experiences from negotiations and the strike itself. The Instagram @crewstoriesig posts both anonymous and named stories from crew members that are actively working and struggling in the industry. Social media has been important for the movements within the industry, but also as a tool of documentation and archiving.

Industry Structure

The film and television industry has a long history, first as individual entities, and more recently as one. Film was always seen as the higher and more prestigious art form. But with the rise of streaming and prestige TV, television shows have become just as, if not more important to our culture than film. Both industries share talent and crews, with franchises easily shifting between both mediums. While television has always been mainly controlled by three networks, networks, film studios, and larger companies have been consolidating and monopolizing the

market. Laborers in the industry look to union representation to help make sure these monopolies don't take advantage of them.

Streaming and Corporate Consolidation

Today, the industry is run by streamers. We are in an era of corporate consolidation, with each of those mergers resulting in a large streaming platform. Discovery bought HBO and HBO Max's successor Max will roll out soon. A streaming platform that combines HBO Max and Discovery Plus. Disney owns Disney Plus and Hulu, which are constantly releasing original material and streaming network shows that premiered the night before. NBC Universal has Peacock, and Paramount has Paramount Plus. It's hard to look at the news and not see an announcement of a new streaming platform.

Not only are we seeing new platforms emerge, but streaming is also the way most people watch TV now. Gone are the days of cable television, and network supremacy. Movie theaters are desperately trying to get their patrons back. And while I love watching a movie in a theater, I understand the shift to at home viewing, and the move away from appointment television. Lives are too busy, and tastes are too niche to wait for what you want to watch. Audiences want the power of choice, and they have it now. Perhaps, they even have too much of it. But streaming has caused problems in the way shows and movies are produced and made. It has affected workers at every level of the industry. Streamers are creating more content than before, but at what cost?

“Just 37 years ago there were 50 companies in charge of most American Media. Now 90% of media in the United States is controlled by just six (Nalbandian).” These large corporations are acquiring more and more production companies and content creators, expecting them to churn out content to create increased profits. Amidst consolidation of companies, these

large conglomerates are firing large portions of their staff. For example, ABC, a subsidiary of Disney, has fired 3% of their staff throughout the spring, and they aren't the only ones. There have been large layoffs within the entertainment industry across the board, all at a time when more content is being created than ever, and CEO salaries are at an all-time high. While corporations dictate distribution, govern the type of content released, and sometimes fund productions, they are not the ones overseeing the day to day. Producers are the people who work with specific projects and oversee budgets, and sometimes, day to day operations. While the term producer is widely used to refer to a variety of positions within the entertainment industry, the producers who work on a production are often independent producers. This means that they are not salaried employees of the companies but are hired on a project-to-project basis. The big six media companies are sometimes referred to as producers, but they are different from independent producers.

The big six run the entertainment industry, but so do unions. For the companies to set prices, and not constantly have a war on who can pay certain production positions more, they come together to interact with the unions. In 1982, The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers was created. Though not the first organization of its kind in Hollywood, AMPTP represents hundreds of motion picture and television producers, many of them large movie studios and TV networks. According to their website, AMPTP is “the trade association responsible for negotiating virtually all industry-wide guild and union contracts (AMPTP).” They are the studios and networks' collective bargaining representatives. The AMPTP has agreements and contracts with all unions in the entertainment industry, and every few years, those contracts and agreements expire. When that happens, the union and AMPTP send a group to negotiate a new contract. This does not always go well. If a union and AMPTP cannot come

up with an agreement by an agreed upon date, the union can then bring about a vote for a strike authorization by its members. If the union votes to authorize a strike, once the agreed upon date passes with no new agreement, the union leaders can choose to go on strike. In the entertainment industry if one union strikes, it shuts down the entire system (AMPTP).

The Unions That Keep Hollywood Afloat

Film and television are union run industries. While there are non-union productions, most widely distributed, narrative film and TV shows are union made. But when we discuss unions, we are not discussing one unified film and television union. The industry is a kaleidoscope of unions that cover most positions, from producers, to grips, actors, directors, and most positions in between. Unions try to make sure that their members are paid fairly, treated well, and aren't being exploited. There are many unions that govern Hollywood, but there are five main unions that are integral to the production process, and our discussion.

The oldest, and most widespread, union is IATSE, or the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees and Motion Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts of the United States, its Territories and Canada. Created in 1893 as a union for stagehands and theatrical workers, IATSE now covers crews in film and television, live events, and broadcasting as well. IATSE is a union made up of 362 Local chapters around the United States and Canada, though there are 55 that are focused on the motion picture industry. Each IATSE local either covers a specific geographic area, or a specific trade. For example, IATSE Local 600 is the International Cinematographers Guild, but Local 52 covers a plethora of departments, such as grips, gaffers, rigging, construction, props, and more but only in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, and Pennsylvania (except for Pittsburgh). Each local is its own nonprofit

entity, which is tasked with negotiating their own labor contracts. However, they are all part of the larger organization that is IATSE (*Iatse*).

The largest, and perhaps most powerful union is the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The Teamsters are responsible for all transportation, as well as representing animal handlers and trainers, casting, couriers, dispatchers, drivers, mechanics, warehouse workers and wranglers. Whether driving a truck of equipment or making sure actors make it on set from their lodgings, teamsters make it happen. While teamsters do not exclusively work with the film industry, no production would happen without them. They are an integral part of the production process (“A Guide to the Unions and Guilds”).

The next three unions carry the name guild in their titles, and while guilds don’t typically provide the same protections as unions, the Director’s Guild, Writer’s Guild, and Screen Actors Guild are all certified unions that also happen to carry the guild title. All founded within Hollywood’s golden age studio system, the DGA, WGA, and SAG represent the names we recognize most in the entertainment industry. There is also the Producer’s Guild, that covers independent producers. These independent producers do not have the power to create agreements with the unions. That power lies with the companies represented by AMPTP.

In 2007, the Writer’s Guild of America went on strike for 100 days, effectively shutting down the film and television industry. The ‘07- ‘08 writer’s strike centered around unequal profit sharing from the studios, and the continued problems of lack of residuals in DVD sales and new media. The WGA strike of 2007 had lasting effects on the entertainment industry, including the rise of reality TV. This genre of television has changed the landscape of the industry, as producers and companies now see an inevitable cash cow: A type of show that draws a large audience, creates a loyal fanbase, and can be made quickly and cheaply. Lower costs and quicker

filming timelines are only possible because of the lack of unions in non-fiction production. These workers have been exploited and overworked by networks and companies to produce incredibly popular content. The rise in Reality TV has affected production on every level and is a lasting effect of AMPTP not rising to WGA's requests in negotiations (Sanchez).

Strikes have their pros and cons, but ultimately, they take work away from many in the industry. For an industry run by unions, they often seem to struggle to have much power in the face of the collective large corporations that produce content. AMPTP is made up of the most powerful media corporations, and often do not want to give into the demands and needs of the unions that make film and TV possible. Negotiations often surround the same few complaints, regardless of union. Those complaints are often poor working conditions, not enough pay or creative control, and the biggest problem with a corporation run industry: the lack of dissemination of profits.

The Industry Today

With an ever-changing industry dependent on cultural and technological shifts, tracking the important moments that incite these changes is a large focus of the study of television and its history. In 2020, we experienced one of those historical shifts. The Covid-19 pandemic shut down the world, including the television and film industry. Not only did the shutdown give creatives time to create, or cause people to re-evaluate their career path, but it gave everyone a lot of time to think. When the Black Lives Matter movement sent out a call for change, that call rippled. People were more aware of what they deserved, and how they were being treated in the industry. With this seismic shift in society, people started to notice problems that they had turned a blind eye to before.

Pandemic Shutdowns and Industry Shifts

Television was booming when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, but like many other industries, everything shut down. Nearly every person who worked in television and film, many of them freelancers, were out of work with no return in sight. However, the Covid-19 lockdowns raised the demand for new television. Everyone was home and looking for something new to watch. By the end of 2020, some productions had started to resume, but set looked vastly different than it had before the pandemic. Many crews were operating with fewer people, in order to keep the possibility of transmission low. This often led to longer hours, and more responsibility, as an entire new production department sprouted called Covid Safety Officers. In addition to smaller crews, Covid protocols changed how meals were offered and tried to encourage distancing. The film industry has run for so long on trauma bonding, and the idea that the production is a family. By forcing isolation on set, a tough job became even harder and lonelier.

Covid-19 brought financial difficulties for everyone; productions included. Even before Covid, the industry was trying to pump out cheap content fast for the ever-evolving demand. So, when Covid-19 hit, all of that increased. Quick and cheap productions lead to massive safety concerns, especially for below the line labor. Cheaper productions often led to personnel cuts, which means longer hours for the crew they do have. (Dillon)

Set Safety

Since the pandemic, there have been numerous social media groups popping up that outline stories from productions of below the line talent being treated horrifically and as if they are not even human. It only takes a minute of scrolling through @crewstoriesig on Instagram to see that the same things keep happening repeatedly on set after set, production after production. There is a clear link between treatment of the crew and respect given from the higher ups on a

shoot. @crewstoriesig is one of the largest collectors of such stories. While this account highlights lighthearted memes and anecdotes from film and television crews, they have been an important part of bringing awareness to labor struggles within the industry. Submitted stories span the years, some decades old. Most importantly, it highlights the whistleblowers of current productions. In early March of 2023, multiple stories were posted about an unfolding story on a New York production. According to one post, “There have been multiple instances where crew has ended up in the ER because of our working conditions.” This was after the crew was expected to work 14-hour days for an entire week. Another post about the same production discussed the consistent overnights they were expected to work. Everyone was overworked, and after “a camera PA fell off the back of a lift gate while rushing to set up... and was rushed to the hospital,” the crew decided enough was enough. “Our crew stood up and turned off the lights and cameras as production wanted the show to go on.” (@crewstoriesig)

The crew showed they have the power to stop a production, and they did. After production executives told them it would get better, production resumed. But things were only better for a few days, until the cycle all started again. A few days later, another crew member from this production submitted a story. After being told they were going into a week of overnights, and that their hotels would have to be personally paid for, and maybe reimbursed later, the crew got even more worried, regretting accepting the producers’ terms instead of going on strike. The anonymous crew member quantified the labor struggles throughout the industry.

We have left too much room for predatory productions like this to get their shooting schedule done no matter the cost the crews and health and safety. No one in this industry should have to choose between staying alive or collecting their paycheck every day. With the impending writers’ strike, it puts pressure on the entire crew to just stay put and it

feels so unfair that producers and three letter networks behind it know that.

(@crewstoriesig)

“Rust” Shooting

In the fall of 2021, concerns for safety on sets nearly came to a head. Between the *Rust* shooting, and the threat of an IATSE strike, the industry finally seemed to be stopping to listen. On October 21, 2021, Alec Baldwin, the star, and producer of the low-budget western *Rust* was rehearsing a scene in which he shoots his gun towards the camera. He pulled the trigger, and a live bullet flew from the weapon, striking and killing the cinematographer, Helena Hutchins. Days prior crew members had walked off the set of *Rust* due to unsafe working conditions and the refusal of production to provide crew members with safety rides or nearby hotels after working long days on set. (James)

This tragedy called into question all the safety measures found on a film set, but specifically the ones surrounding weapons. In the days and months following the accident, fingers were pointed, and questions were asked. How did a real bullet end up on set? Who checked the gun before it was handed to Baldwin? Whose responsibility was it to make sure that all safety protocol was followed? These questions never found definitive answers, but the real thing at fault was the system, and the producers. When producers are willing to put profit over humans, deadly accidents happen. Regardless of who checked the gun, the problem still lies with the producers, one of whom was Baldwin himself. This set already had questions about safety, and the unnecessary tragedy of Hutchins’s death should be a warning to all production industries. When we don’t put safety and humans first, people die.

IATSE: Strike Authorization

Mere days before the *Rust* tragedy, members of IATSE West were fed up with this very sentiment. They were ready to strike and shut down the entire entertainment industry if the negotiations between IATSE and AMPTP over their contract renewal did not meet the needs of IATSE members. After a union wide vote, IATSE passed a strike authorization and was prepared to strike on Monday October 18, 2021, if needed. This strike would have been the largest labor strike in Hollywood since World War II. It would have shut down the entertainment industry in a way we haven't seen since the WGA strike of 2008. The IATSE West chapters at the bargaining table were fighting for "higher minimum wage, humane off-hours between shifts, and increased pay for jobs on non-broadcast streaming shows (Winkie)." The last point was of the utmost importance.

Since the rise of streaming in the last decade, contracts made for streaming productions fell under a category called new media. These contracts often called for less pay, little, if any residuals from the productions' success, and lack of pension hours. IATSE agreed to these terms when streaming was an unknown entity, but now streaming *is* the entertainment industry. Streamers create much of the content we consume. On October 16th, IATSE and AMPTP came to an agreement, but not one that the majority of IATSE members were happy with. They were fighting for real change in the industry, and while they got a few of the things they asked for, AMPTP only came to the table after the threat of a strike was announced. (Winkie)

A strike could have meant an upheaval of the Hollywood system. It would have forced producers to really understand what would happen if content creation ceased to exist. An IATSE strike could have changed the industry and made it a more welcoming, sustainable, and equitable place. Instead, the companies tried to placate crews, but no one was happy. An anonymous crew

member stated, “a 54-hour weekend plus 10-hour turnaround, four nights a week, comes out to 94 hours for sleep and ourselves. This leaves 74-hour work weeks. That’s it. The contract is for a 74-hour work week. Why would we want that? (@IA_stories)” Who would want that? The real question to ask here is, why didn’t the union members still strike? The terms were met, but they realized that they had not asked for enough. It’s an age-old struggle with institutions of power. AMPTP fears the stoppage of production, but not enough to give the crew what they deserve. They agree to one small thing, and the union bargainers, afraid of their loss of income and benefits, agree. Because at the end of the day, no one wants production to stop. But nothing will truly change if we keep taking these small morsels. For real, sustainable, institutional change to occur, the system must be stopped. Corporations need to understand the power of the crew.

Runaway Productions

“There were 599 adult scripted original series across broadcast, cable, and streaming services in 2022 – a new record (Schneider).” Since the rise of streaming, we have been in an era of Peak TV, where the amount of content created and released has been ever increasing. However, that type of growth isn’t sustainable, and while we maybe at the end of the peak TV era, we are still suffering from the consequences of streamers, and corporations pushing out content at a remarkable pace. To keep up with these expedited timelines, productions need to cut costs any way they can. A very popular way to do this is through runaway productions. Runaway production is a term used to refer to “film productions and television shows that are filmed in another country but intended for release in the U.S (US Legal, Inc).” The move to international production lowers the cost of production and escapes the union rules present in many U.S. production hubs. The term runaway production can also refer to moving productions to cities in

the U.S, often in the south, that have tax incentives for filming and less union rule. This is what initially led to Atlanta, Georgia, becoming the production hub it currently is.

Runaway productions exacerbate the same labor problems that continue to plague the industry, but because there are no union protections, companies can get away with it. Runaway productions can easily exploit their crew by making them work incredibly long hours and expecting them to do it for months on end. This is bad for everyone on the production. Look at any of your favorite recent Netflix shows, and there is a high chance that show was a runaway production. *Wednesday* was shot in Romania and *Shadow and Bone* spent much of principal photography in Hungary.

While the problem has increased in recent years, Runaway productions are not a new problem for the industry. Runaway productions started popping up following World War II when production overseas became increasingly less expensive than filming in Los Angeles. While filming on location outside of large production hubs can help the economy of a town, city, or country, it is often at the cost of cheap labor and exploitation. This doesn't even consider the environmental impact productions can have, using up limited resources in a given area. Runaway productions aren't objectively bad. But when they are used to exploit cheap labor, and avoid union protections, it becomes an economic problem for the film industry, and film hubs like Los Angeles, California, are estimated to have lost \$8 billion dollars because of runaway productions. Runaway productions can help bolster local economies and even create resurgences in local productions in many places, but it comes at a cost; it feeds into the exploitation of crew, and the supremacy and control of streamers and networks. (Ferguson)

What Can Be Done to Change the Industry

There is no simple solution, shy of a complete overhaul of the system, not only in this industry but regarding labor in the United States. Humans are thrown to the wayside to make money for large corporations. However, the film and television industry can be looked at as a microcosm of the labor issues at large. Every level of the industry lingers with the same problems, though it is more obvious in some places than others. Starting on student film sets, and being perpetuated through big budget blockbuster productions, the inequity of treatment for different production positions and departments is seen. While change is never easy and will take time and people willing to put themselves on the line, there are things that can be worked on and improved now. We can start to change the industry with a focus on four elements.

Life Work Balance

The largest complaint I heard when interviewing members of production was about the hours they were expected to work. Average days on set are upwards of 12 hours, and, depending on the production, occasionally run close to 20 or more hours. How can you live and sustain a life when you are working that much? There is no need for days that exceeds 12 hours; in fact, a few people I spoke to believe that even a 10-hour day should be the absolute max allowed. Even though the newest IATSE contract guaranteed 54 hours off after a 5-day work week, it did not put any restrictions on the numbers of hours worked per day, nor did it address the troublesome concept of Fraturdays. According to an industry member, Fraturdays are “that terrible mingling of Friday and Saturday. The loss of your entire weekend to a work schedule that sees you beginning your day on Friday, and getting off work early Saturday, sometimes after the sun comes up (Baron).”

Fratursdays are reserved for overnight shoots, but they often result in the minimizing of the 54 hours off. Once you do get off work early in the morning on Saturday, you will often spend the rest of the day catching up on sleep, leaving perhaps only Sunday as a day for anything non-work related. Fratursdays are an example of how productions often work around union rules to maximize shooting hours. Another way the crew is often exploited is through meal penalties. According to the IATSE local 52 contract, a meal must be given every 6 hours. However, the only way that producers are penalized for skipping a meal or running over on a designated mealtime, is through a meal penalty. A meal penalty is a fine that the production must pay when they skip a meal or miss a designated mealtime. The problem with this system is that it is easy to exploit. In fact, producers will often factor meal penalties into their budget if they know that they will want to push through mealtimes. (Johnson, Katie Whitmire)

Creating a change in hours worked per day would require an agreement between many different unions, but would need to be backed by the DGA, SAG, and the producers. As we have seen from previous negotiations, it is difficult to get all these groups to agree to the same rules, even though a reduction in hours would be beneficial to the health and safety of every member of a production, not only the below the line workers. In fact, many actors are also taxed by long hours. When Jenna Ortega was shooting the hit Netflix show *Wednesday*, she was working 12-hour days on set, and then expected to go train in cello, or fight choreography after. Reducing hours worked per day, and ultimately per week, would improve the lives of everyone in the film production world, and would create a more sustainable work force. I spoke with many people who fought to work in film production and on set but decided that their health and well-being was more important than 12-plus-hour days. Constant turnover of staff has led to a lack of skilled labor, a problem that can be solved if the industry adopts new sustainable working schedules.

Pay Equity

The second change to tackle is pay. While production can be an incredibly lucrative field, the pay gap between positions and departments is incredibly problematic. Most positions on set are unionized and their pay reflects union standards. However, the entire production department that has fallen between the cracks. This department includes Production Managers, Production Coordinators, and Production Assistants. This department is “the glue of a show.” They disseminate information to the crew daily, take care of the crew, coordinate travel and wrap parties, while being the hub for questions and organization of a film set. The production department are the unsung heroes of a film set, but they are rarely compensated for it. Until recently, there were no unions that included the production team, and for the film and television world there still aren't.

Production Assistants face the harshest realities when it comes to hours, treatments, and pay inequity. Production Assistants, or PAs, are considered entry level positions, and many people treat them as unimportant and replaceable. But the truth is, no production would ever be able to function without PAs. PAs do so much work that is not noticed but would be immediately missed if they were not there. There are PAs that assist just about every department, and make sure that a set runs smoothly. And while they might be considered entry level jobs, PAs are constantly given tasks of high importance, but are rarely, if ever, compensated for it. There are no union rules that govern the treatment of PAs, and the harsh reality of their job can be seen in the constant turnover of the position. People get easily burnt out after being expected to stand on their feet all day, while often getting yelled at by someone from production, or a member of the public who is upset that they are blocking off a road or being told to please keep their volume level down. And for all the abuse they take, PAs are paid much below a living wage. An avid PA

I spoke with and broke down how jobs are often offered to PAs. Pay is based on number of hours. For example, many offers for work will come with a number like \$120/10 hours. This means that you will get paid \$120 for 10 hours of work. If you work fewer than 10 hours, you will still get paid the \$120. If you work more than 10 hours, you should qualify for overtime. But it doesn't always pan out that way. (Johnson, Finn Lloyd)

The amount of money offered to a PA can drastically differ, since there is no union or oversight on standardizing that pay. Commercial shoots tend to pay more, with an average of \$300/12 hours. But most television shows, especially long running network shows pay well below that commercial standard. Let's say someone is offered \$200 for 12 hours, and that they work the full 12. That is just above the New York minimum wage at \$16.67 an hour. And that doesn't consider travel time, or work that happens past the 12-hour mark.

The pay problem not only lies in pay gap, but also in where the money really goes. On large film and television shoots, corporations are funneling millions of dollars into these productions, but the money isn't funneling down. Much of the budget often goes to above the line talent and securing large names for marketing appeal. After all, it is still show business, and the main aim of production companies and distributors is to make money off the product, which is understandable. But there must be a more equitable way to disseminate funds to a production so that everyone involved is getting paid a living wage because while \$15 an hour is the minimum wage in New York, the average PA rate of \$16.67 an hour is not actually a livable wage in New York City or Los Angeles, the two hubs of production.

Respect and Communication

There are humans behind every part of this industry, but they are treated like expendable capital and not human beings. Every person on a set, or working on any part of a production,

brings a unique set of skills necessary to do their job. From the PA, who may still be learning, to the grips, gaffer, cinematographer, costumer, director, and everyone in between, each skill set is necessary to making a production happen. There is no one more or less important than another. To make a production happen, you need the entire team. But in this current landscape, and really since the inception of Hollywood, varying levels of importance have been placed upon certain department and jobs within production, and the industry at large. Those levels of importance have often been reflected in the amount of money and acclaim given to those positions.

However, the problem of lack of respect, and importance, often comes from a lack of understanding. Producers, as the lead on projects, set the tone for the entire production. But if the producer doesn't understand the job of any given member or department, it is all too easy for them to write members of production, or even entire departments, off, placing importance on, and only providing respect to the jobs they understand. These jobs tend to be above the line jobs, such as talent and directors (Johnson, David Householder).

After speaking to various members of production teams, who have worked with an array of producers, it is clear that understanding every job on a production is crucial to a level of respect that puts humans before capital, and that makes a successful production. While the producer needs to understand all the moving pieces, there also needs to be an understanding from the rest of crew of what everyone brings to the production, including the producer. If we can understand the stress and skills needed for each job, we can learn to respect each other and our contributions to the work. A production requires an entire team to be successful and create a unified project. With education and understanding of what everyone brings to a production, respect can be the driving force that brings everyone together, to work towards a common unified goal.

While respect is important, it must come with open communication. This, again, starts from the top, and from the very beginning. The producer should be transparent about pay, hours, and expectations starting with the job offer. This will set the tone for the entire production. Speaking with seasoned PAs, many said that the most successful sets start the day with entire crew meetings. This ensures that everyone is on the same page and understands what needs to get accomplished that day. Open communication necessitates keeping people in the loop. When something changes, everyone knows about it and understands how the changes effect what is being asked of them.

Producers are the key to open communication and respect. They set the tone for the entire shoot, from the very start. But it is important to maintain that communication, whether through meetings, emails, detailed call sheets, or ideally, a mixture of all. Producers need to be active members of the production community, both on set and off. Great producers visit set and interact with members of the crew at all levels, attempting to understand the needs of crew. Speaking with Dave Householder, a grip from the set of *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, he said that the best producer he ever worked with was Adele Romanski. Her other credits included Oscar Winner *Moonlight* and Oscar Nominated *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Householder spoke highly of Romanski's interaction with the crew. She came to set and spoke to everyone. She asked them what they needed to best do their job, and she followed through in trying to acquire it in a timely fashion. It isn't important to just talk about change, but to actively seek out the problems and provide timely solutions to make the lives of everyone on the project better (Prigge).

Managing Expectations

In order to implement the above solutions, we need more leaders like Romanski. Leaders who ask questions, who strive to understand, and who value every member of a production. It

needs to start with the corporations, which means they have to get something out of the changes as well. The best way to implement all of the solutions with a focus on both people and corporations is to switch from a quantity-based system to a quality-based system. Putting the quality of a production at the forefront could help reinforce the need for slower timelines. These slower timelines of production would keep people employed longer, working less hours in a day, and providing the work life balance that industry laborers crave. The question remains in how to get corporations to change their focus to higher quality, less quantity.

Marvel is the perfect case study. Marvel, a subsidiary of Disney, has been a huge brand in Hollywood for the past decade and a half. The first decade, Marvel built their brand identity and crafted stories around comic book characters that people loved and fell even more in love with in the films. People waited with anticipation for the next installment of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). The fate of all these characters, and the end of an era happened in 2019 with the release of *Avengers: Endgame*. *Endgame* sealed the fate for many beloved characters that we will no longer see in the MCU, such as Chris Evans as Captain America, Robert Downey Jr. as Iron Man, and Scarlett Johansen as Black Widow.

At the start of the MCU, one to two Marvel films were released a year, and people came out in droves to see them. In 2017, they started to amp up their releases and released three movies a year through 2019, culminating with the event that was *Avengers: Endgame*. But since that release, Marvel movies haven't carried the same weight or anticipation. Due the pandemic, there wasn't another Marvel film released until 2021. Between 2021 and 2022, fifteen Marvel properties were released, a mixture of television shows on Disney Plus and wide release movies. Fans started to get burnt out. While it is hard to determine streaming numbers, as streamers aren't required to released them, many Marvel fans I have spoken to started to fall away from the

brand. While the first series releases, *Wandavision* and *The Falcon and Winter Soldier* were good, the quality of the shows varies greatly, with the last release of 2022, *She-Hulk*, coming under fire for underserving visual effects. The push to flood the market with Marvel content resulted in a brand known for quality releasing things below their expected quality levels (Fennessey).

The first release of 2023, *Ant Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* made around \$475 million dollars in international box office sales. “That sounds like a lot of money to any common human. It sounds like not a lot of money to Bob Iger and Bob Capek and Kevin Feige, the powers that be at this brand (Fennessey).” The drastic decrease in quality that results from a push for quantity is losing Marvel money, and this is the only thing that can maybe get corporations to stop and consider the switch to a quality over quantity approach.

Once timelines have been slowed, and better content is coming out steadily, there is the question of how you get a CEO or a corporation to care about individual laborers. How can you get executives to actively understand every part of production? While there is no catch all solution to this problem, my proposal is education. All current executives, producers, and CEOs at these corporations must go through a training course to understand what every member of a production does. They should work as a PA for a day and shadow a grip. They should have to learn in a classroom the structure of a production, but also see what the day-to-day life of these positions is like. For the future, people should need to work up the ranks. A PA today should be an executive in a decade. In essence, the film industry needs to be run by filmmakers. These six companies that control 90% of the media landscape could change the industry for the better which would create higher quality content. But that’s not what is important to them. They want

to make the most money possible, at the cost of the people it takes to write, develop, produce, and create content worth watching.

Industry Changemakers

Change in the industry is happening because people are starting to care and understand their power. This change is coming from two sources. The first is from an individual level. High powered individuals, producers like Romanski and others, are using their power to start to make incremental change. They are working within the corporate system to do what they can to improve productions and the lives of laborers. But perhaps the more important change that is occurring is at a collective community level. People with little power are coming together to fight for a better industry for all.

Individual: Top-Down Change

Adele Romanski is the perfect example of an industry changemaker. She is taking action to make her sets a more welcoming, and sustainable place for all crew members, and really all members of a production. Romanski has made a career creating indie films that are telling important stories from underrepresented communities. She has found writers and directors with stories that needed telling and helped elevate their voices. Such was the case with her collaborator Barry Jenkins, the writer and director of *Moonlight* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Maybe Romanski didn't set out to be an industry change maker, but to make work she felt was important. But she is leading by example in creating a set environment that puts people over profit. Romanski clearly understands that being a leader isn't about being in control. It's about understanding the needs of everyone and doing your best to provide the solutions that help make their job easier.

Producer/Director Greg Yaintanes is all about finding efficient solutions on his sets. The job of any producer is to make sure a production happens on time and under budget. But Yaintanes takes it one step further. He wants to make the production the most efficient it can be, and he gathers data from the crew to do it. When Yaintanes joined the fifth season of the popular television show *House* back in 2009, he noticed that the show could be run better, that things were harder than they needed to be. To find out the best way to make change, “he quizzed every crew member about what they would change to make the set a better place to work (Chagollan).” The results were compiled into a paper, and after implementation he took 18 days off production. While this is great for the bottom line, the important part is how he did this.

By learning the struggles of the crew, Yaintanes was able to ascertain that one of the largest problems on the production was moving a wall three times a day. He didn’t understand why they had to keep moving the same wall, and why it took so long to do. After speaking with the crew, he found out “it was built in such a way that it took eight men with screw guns twenty minutes to take apart (Chagollan).” It was hard work that took time and had to be done repeatedly. Yaintanes fixed the problem with a motorized pulley, that took away time and labor. It made it easier on the crew and saved the production time overall. Yaintanes approach to improvement is all about efficiency. According to Yaintanes, “As much as I wear several creative hats, I also have a deep respect for the bottom line. My business is a business as much as it is an art, and to keep making your art you must be conscious of cost (Chagollan).” While this way of thinking is not human first, but the byproduct of efficiency should be shorter hours and less wasted time. Overall, Yaintanes integration of crew ideas and consideration is a step forward for the industry.

Like Yaintanes, there are others in the industry trying to create change without recognizing that the system may be the problem. Ben Affleck and Matt Damon have created Artists Equity, “a production venture that vows to expand profit participation and provide a talent-friendly environment to creatives (Littleton).” While this venture is more focused on creatives than crew, it brings up two important conversations happening in the industry right now. The first is the idea of working within the system to create change without acknowledging the capitalistic structures that reinforce the problems, and the second is the idea of profit participation in a streaming age. Artists Equity is a valiant idea, one that many artists have tried in the past, but it’s easy to question its effectiveness, especially considering its first project. The Ben Affleck directed, and Matt Damon starring film *Air* was the first project to be released under the Artists Equity venture. But this is a branded film specifically selling Air Jordan sneakers through a story about their creation. Brand films are an up and coming medium where marketing and filmmaking meet. By having a brand film as their first venture, Artists Equity is proving that they just want to work within the system and aren’t ready to acknowledge that the system is the problem. It’s hard to convince large media conglomerate corporations to recognize the importance of creators without changing the entire system. And while Artists Equity might not be shifting the entire system, there are people making steps towards it (Littleton).

The Push for Collective Change

While some producers are simply changing the industry one production at a time, there are entire groups of people unionizing and actively moving to make the industry a more equitable and sustainable industry to work in. I had the pleasure of speaking to Cheyanne Cage, one of the founders of the Stand with Production movement. Stand with Production is a push to unionize the often-exploited production department within the commercial sphere. Cheyanne

was the production supervisor on a job for a large media company. After her and her producer worked over 200 hours in a 2-week period, her producer “called me up and said, what if we don’t show up tomorrow? Imagine what would happen?” This question started a movement. On the third shoot day, Cheyenne and her producer walked off the job. This action turned into Stand with Production. The movement went viral, and within a week they had a 400-person town hall (Johnson, Cheyenne Cage).

Gathering people turned out to be the easy part. Convincing people to join was much, much harder. The problem in the production department is that people think they are closer to upper management than to crew, but that is not the reality. While they are the link, in many circumstances, the production department isn’t upper management. They are the ones taking care of and looking after the crew, but they are one of the only departments not under union protection, until now. Under the IATSE umbrella, Stand with Production is in the process of unionizing over 5,000 people, many of them commercial production assistants. This is the first time that PAs will be unionized in the US since the 1950s. But many have reservations over unionizing, especially as a PA where you take the work you can get. Cheyenne said the hardest part of unionizing “is convincing people you deserve this stuff.” The stuff she is referring to being job protection, fair wages, safe sets, health care, and maybe even a pension.

What started as a move to unionize has grown exponentially. Cheyenne, and the Stand with Production team, hope that this production department union will help film and TV PAs to unionize. But it’s so much bigger than unionizing. “It’s class justice, union work. Equity work (Johnson, Cheyenne Cage).” It’s about creating opportunities and paths to join the industry for everyone, especially those in underrepresented communities. Everyone has a story to tell, and every person should be able to be a part of telling those stories. Stand with production wants to

create pipelines for training and job opportunities to open the production world to make it accessible to everyone. Production departments tend to be full of white women, and many other film departments tend to be dominated by white men. But change must happen, and according to Cage, “People who are more at risk, are galvanized to make change (Johnson, Cheyenne Cage).”

Commercial production departments aren't the only people pushing for change by unionizing. Entire indie films are pushing for unionization, as well as departments and companies that have been historically excluded from the existing industry unions like the Saturday Night Live editing department, and even reality TV. However, the biggest upheaval in the industry right now is the state of current unions. The WGA, DGA, and SAG all have bargaining agreements that expire this spring and summer, which means that negotiations are underway. The Writer's Guild is the first one up, and their agreement expired on May 1st. The WGA and AMPTP have been in negotiations since March 20th, and based on the strike authorization that received a 97% yes from the members of the WGA, it is not going well. But there is immense power in even threatening a strike. Due to the pittance that IATSE settled with in their almost strike in 2021, the WGA realizes the power they wield and the importance of demanding everything they need to improve the industry (Tapp).

The current negotiations surround an idea that Ben Affleck and Matt Damon are trying to tackle with Artists Equity: profit participation. Though for writers, it is often called residuals, the fight lies in the same arena. Before streaming, writers made most of their money off the syndication of television shows and the residuals they would get from reruns and sales. There was a level of ownership of their writing that was built into the contracts. But with the rise of streaming, everything has changed for writers. Not only are they not given any ownership, or residuals, writers rooms have grown smaller, series orders have dropped from 22-episode

seasons to just 8 or 10. “In this negotiation, writers are demanding protections that address all the ways the studios have cut pay, squeezed more work into less time or onto fewer writers, and demanded more work for free (Sakoui).”

The WGA officially called for a strike at midnight on May 2nd, 2023, after AMPTP refused to negotiate on some of the key problems. Leading up to the strike, the discourse online was a mixture of support for the strike and writers saying that strikes aren’t good for anyone, and that it should be avoided at all costs. But I beg to differ. “Always remember that whenever there is a dispute that forces a strike, it’s only because of the greed of those at the top (Johnson, Cheyenne Cage).” This strike isn’t only about the fate of writers but could set a precedent for the entire industry. All other entertainment unions are picketing with and standing behind the WGA in this strike. On Thursday May 4th, the WGA held a meeting to discuss the strike. Writer Michael Kennedy attended the meeting and had the following to say:

Every Hollywood union was not only there at the WGA meeting tonight, DGA, SAG/AFTRA, IATSE, LiUNA, TEAMSTERS, but they all spoke with passion and power and the promise to not only back the WGA, but to stand with us every step of the way during our strike. The AMPTP and their greed has just created the greatest modern Hollywood Labor Movement. They will lose and our fight will continue on in every industry and corner of this country where the people are suffering under the weight of Wall Street and their endless thirst for profit and growth (@michaeltjkennedy).

It’s important to remember that, historically, strikes have resulted in important and impactful changes that impacted everyone in the end. Historical strikes have resulted in modern workers having weekends and better working conditions. While the WGA strike is only days old, it has already started to impact the industry. Companies have seen stock prices plummet, late

night TV has shut down, and series that were in production have paused filming. There is no way to know how long this strike will last, but with AMPTP resisting the WGA's important requests, the industry could be shut down for quite a while. But change always comes with some suffering, and the laborers of the film and TV industry are tired of daily suffering so are standing strong in their push for change. This strike could dictate the future of labor in the industry.

Conclusion

The film and television industry employs 2.4 million people in the U.S. and can inject “as much as \$250,000 per day” into a local economy when a film shoots on location (“Driving Economic Growth”). The industry is a huge part of the U.S. economy and is arguably an even bigger part of our everyday life. We spend, on average, 4 hours a day watching TV, which doesn't even include films and media we consume when scrolling through our phones (“Time Spent Watching Television in the U.S. 2019-2024”). Film and TV are such a large part of our life, but unless you're in the industry, we often don't think about the amount of work and labor that goes into our favorite TV show or movie. TV shows and movies take hundreds of people to create, but most people only know about the front facing, above the line positions, and the below the line workers are often left behind. This leads to exploitation, especially for the non-unionized positions like production assistants. Expected to work 12–14-hour days, at minimum, with pay often not reflecting the amount of work done, laborers within the film and television industry are being worked to the bone; and for what?

Corporate greed challenges unions and industry workers to push for change. It is impossible to speak about the industry labor conditions without talking about the larger problems of capitalism and corporate greed. If corporations trickled down their profits to those responsible for their success, things would start to change. This is one of the things the WGA is fighting for.

But the question needs to be asked: is it worth working within the system or is that simply feeding the corporatization of film and television? The past decade has seen the prominence of streamers but also the massive acquisitions of media companies. 90% of the industry is in the control of only six companies. It's a problem, one that has plagued the industry since its inception when studios ruled film and three networks dominated television. This problem is prevalent in most industries in this country. The film and television industry is simply a microcosm in which to look at these much larger problems of labor exploitation and corporate greed.

Change is hard. It's a rewiring and a deprogramming of society. It means understanding that everyone deserves a living wage and respect, no matter what their job title or position within a production, or on a larger scale, an organization. There is no way to separate this work of equitizing the industry, supporting, and bolstering unions, and making safer sets from the larger ideas of social justice, class, and capitalism. Within the industry it may seem hard to standardize practices, due to the plethora of different types of productions. Within television alone there are sitcoms, hour long dramas, mini-series, reality, competition shows, multi-cam, network, and streamers. This doesn't account for the effect the size of budget a production has and how it runs. There are ways to approach change that will not only standardize treatment throughout the film and television industry but could create impactful change throughout this country (Johnson, Cheyenne Cage).

The basis for all this change is understanding and mutual respect. We cannot hope to create a more equitable industry, let alone society, if we do not start from the idea that every single person is important and deserves respect. That is the bare minimum. Once we have a base level of respect for all human beings, we can move onto trying to understand. Understand their

job on a set, their contribution to the production, and that every human contributes to the world at large. No one person is more important than another, not on a set and not in life. It takes every member of a production to make it happen. But to understand that it is necessary to truly know how a set works and what each department and position does. We need more channels and avenues of education, that would open opportunities for growth, upward mobility, and an expansion of the crew to underrepresented groups. Hollywood runs on nepotism, and it shouldn't. Everyone should have a chance to join the industry. If those at the top really understand and reflect their fellow team members, treating them as multi-faceted humans should come naturally. The last piece to the puzzle is open communication, transparency within any production, company, or organization. Shorter workdays and better pay would come as a natural expansion from true understanding and respect, and transparency within a production.

These changes are simple in theory, but complex in that they carry the baggage of social constructs, inherent biases, and the lies of capitalism. A movement towards equity anywhere starts with a move towards looking at your fellow human with respect, no matter who they are. As a future producer and change maker in the industry, I am empowered by the courage of those standing up for change, and willing to put themselves and their jobs on the line to better the industry for everyone. A small step forward is still movement, and while the awareness of problems within the industry seems innocuous, it is an important small step forward. With industry upheaval and strikes on the horizon, now seems like the best time to push for systemic change within the industry. People are calling out for change, and it is high time for those that control 90% of the industry to start listening.

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