AFTRA RECEIVES DIRECT CHARTER FROM AFL-CIO; SAG AND AFTRA MAY DROP JOINT BARGAINING

The American Federation of Television & Radio Artists (AFTRA), a national union of more than 70,000 performers, journalists, broadcasters, recording artists, and other talent working in the entertainment and news industry, announces that the AFL-CIO has granted a direct charter to the union. It becomes the 56th union affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

The union also announces that its national board approved a resolution that “sets the stage” for the union to negotiate contracts separately from the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). The two unions have had a joint bargaining relationship since 1981. According to the SAG, however, the two unions recently have been meeting in joint co-chaired committees on wages and working conditions to prepare for upcoming bargaining.

The AFTRA has had a relationship with the AFL-CIO through its membership in the Associated Actors and Artistes of America (Four A’s), an affiliate of the AFL-CIO. Other Four A’s unions include SAG, Actors’ Equity Association, American Guild of Musical Artists, American Guild of Variety Artists, Hebrew Actors’ Union, and the Guild of Italian American Actors. AFTRA President Roberta Reardon says the granting of the charter is a “truly historic moment for our union.” She says that in placing AFTRA on “equal footing” with other AFL-CIO affiliates, it will be easier for the union to work with other unions such as the Communications Workers of America, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, and the American Federation of Musicians.

Both Reardon and SAG President Alan Rosenberg indicate that the AFL-CIO would also grant direct charters to Actors’ Equity and SAG, upon the request of either union. Rosenberg, who serves on the AFL-CIO executive council, however, says that at SAG’s request, such a direct affiliation will remain in place only as long as the “affiliating union continues to be a member of the Four A’s and remains bound by the obligations of such membership. Four A’s membership particularly includes the obligation to resolve jurisdictional disputes through the Four A’s dispute resolution process.”

The AFTRA board voted to authorize its bargaining team to negotiate its upcoming contracts with the major television studios separately from the SAG. The contracts, negotiated with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, expire June 30. According to the AFTRA, the SAG “abrogated” its joint bargaining agreement in July 2007 when its board of directors adopted a new procedure for the way that voting takes place during contract negotiations. In addition, the AFTRA points out that the SAG is conducting a referendum of its roughly 120,000 members asking whether it should keep its joint bargaining agreement with the AFTRA.

Rosenberg disputes AFTRA’s allegations that the SAG abrogated the joint bargaining agreement. Last month, SAG’s national board of directors voted to send a referendum to its members asking whether the guild should keep its joint bargaining agreement with the AFTRA. A “yes” vote would empower the SAG board to negotiate a new joint bargaining agreement with the AFTRA, or failing that, to allow the SAG to negotiate independently of the AFTRA. The ballots were set to go out February 22, to be returned by March 14. Despite the longstanding joint bargaining agreement, differences between the SAG, whose members historically worked in film, and the AFTRA, with its ties to television and radio, have surfaced from time to time. In 1999 and again in 2003, enough SAG members voted against a plan to consolidate the two unions despite the recommendation by the boards of both unions to merge.

(Source: BNA, Daily Labor Report, No. 26, February 8, 2008, pp. A4-A5.)