



What about citizens?

Mark Bradley

abstract

What is the future of unions within the entertainment industry? One thing is certain: As it continues to 'go digital', cultivating a wider solidarity – inside and outside the business – matters more than ever.

It has been an honor to participate in this conference. I hesitate to use the word 'contribute', but it's been a pleasure to be here.

The topic of our final panel is 'Looking Ahead'. My principal concern is the future of unions in the digital industry. The good news is we have something of a head start. Along with airlines, media/entertainment is the most heavily unionized private-sector industry in the United States. However, as with the airlines, our employers are huge and rapidly getting huger.

As you know, in spite of the apparent diversity in media outlets, only six enormous companies control most of the media in the United States. Our unions must finally suck it up and abandon a quaint 19th century idea of independent craft unions and similarly consolidate. Of course the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) and the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) should join – we share jurisdictions and 44,000 members. But we should also unite with Actors' Equity, the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA), the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the American Federation of Musicians (AFofM), the Directors Guild of America (DGA), the Writers Guild of America (WGA), the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET), the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and the Newspaper Guild. For a start.

Whether or not we can consolidate our unions anytime soon, we have two enormous overarching goals. First, we need to secure jurisdiction as new media platforms and business models arise. I'm proud to say that in the commercials contract of 2006, AFTRA and SAG secured jurisdiction over all commercials – television, radio, and Internet, but also over all media platforms that exist now or will be developed in the future.

Our second goal is to grow our membership. The Employee Free Choice Act will only bring us back to the 1930s, when AFTRA and SAG were founded. We don't face the same professional and even physical risks they faced, but there are serious challenges. In the United States, unions are just barely legal. And in many minds, it's not a given that unions have a right to exist, even in the minds of workers who know they're being exploited.

To grow our membership, we have to find a more powerful way to think and talk about organizing. All too often, we talk to pre-union people only about the goodies they'll get as union members. But union membership isn't about health and pension or members-only perks or even, really, about wages and working conditions. Ultimately, it's about dignity and respect: dignity for the workers and respect for the work they do.

A few years ago, I was talking with a labour organizer and I asked him how I can sell these ideas to a pre-union person. He stopped me cold and said, 'When you're organizing, you're NOT a salesman selling a service to a consumer, you're an agitator promoting a movement to a citizen!'

The title of this conference is 'Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens'. We've heard a lot about authors and creators and their concerns and rights, and we've heard a great deal about workers, but not much about citizens. The concept of citizenship is a key to organizing workers. In the United States, citizens all too often describe themselves only as 'taxpayers'. But to be a citizen means much more.

When I think about citizenship, I'm reminded of that wonderful evening in 2008 when we saw a worldwide outpouring of joy over the results of the election in the United States. Whatever you may think about President Obama's performance, it's instructive to ask what made people literally dance in the streets on that November night. In the United States, people were happy that their candidate had won, and they were probably excited about the prospect for change. Certainly everyone was caught up in the historical significance of electing our first African-American President.

But it goes much deeper than that. On that night, a great many people realized, some for the first time in their lives, what it means to be a citizen. It's the empowering feeling of taking personal responsibility to contribute to the greater good, which is also precisely what it means to be a union member.

Am I optimistic about the future? Guardedly, yes. I don't think that thirty years of Reaganomics has completely extinguished the feeling that we're all in this together.

Let me share a little story. During the six-month AFTRA-SAG commercials strike of 2000, I was serving as President of the Twin Cities AFTRA Local. When people ask me what it was like, I'm reminded of a comment by a veteran of the Second World War, who said that it was a million dollar experience, and he wouldn't give you a plug nickel for it. For me, the 'million dollar' part was finding again and again that in the general public there is an abiding reservoir of support for working people.

One day, after we had picketed at the AT&T Building in Minneapolis, a couple of us were stranded and had to take a cab back to the AFTRA office. From his appearance

and speech pattern, our cab driver appeared to be Somali. (There is a large Somali population in the Twin Cities area.) He saw our signs and asked what we were doing, and we briefly explained. When we arrived at the office, our driver absolutely refused to take a tip. 'You're on strike', he said. 'No tip'. Here was a man from another continent, another culture; God knows what horrors he had seen or even endured. But he GOT IT. He knew nothing about AFTRA or commercials, but he felt solidarity with us as fellow citizen-workers, taking power into our hands.

How did the strike turn out? Not bad. You never 'win' a six-month strike, you only survive. (That's the 'plug nickel' part.) But they didn't bust us, we didn't give anything back, and we got jurisdiction over advertising on the Internet. In short, a bunch of actors stood up against some of the most powerful corporations on Earth and we not only survived, but also moved ahead.

If we can raise that sense of empowerment in our citizens who labor in the digital industry, then we may someday all dance together in the streets. Thank you.

The opinions expressed here are those of Mark Bradley and do not necessarily represent those of Actors' Equity, AFTRA, or SAG.

the author

Mark Bradley has been a professional actor for 39 years, spending most of his career in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. He has performed in theatre, film, television, radio and TV commercials, industrial/corporate videos, print work, and live industrials. He is a member of Actors' Equity, AFTRA, and SAG, and has been active on his local Equity Liaison Committee and the Local and National AFTRA Boards. He attended Dartmouth College (A.B.) and the University of Minnesota (M.A., Ph.D.), and has taught and directed theatre at the college level. As a freelance writer, Dr. Bradley has created corporate educational materials, written and edited newsletters, edited a job-seeking manual, and written and performed in independent video productions, one of which won a national award from the AFL-CIO. He is the author of the online book *The Actor's Tax Guide*, and has recently completed two children's stories and a screenplay.

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