



News by and for workers in the live entertainment and events industry

LONG HOURS KILL: STATE UNIONISM OR CLASS-CONSCIOUS UNIONISM?

by Fiona Wrench (PGH)

Whatever happened to the 8 hour workday? Once again, Flyspace pushed us to work extremely long days last month on Light Up Night. Full-timers were working more than 15 hour days, going until 4 AM in some cases, then returning only a few hours later to work another marathon shift until dawn the next day. This happens in our industry all the time.

This situation is *unacceptable*. And dangerous: In early November, James “Trapper” McEvoy, a rigging grip working on a low-budget horror film in Louisiana on an IATSE crew, was electrocuted while working at height. IATSE’s official statement about the incident included no information on what happened, who died, or what he was working on, nor did it bother to mention how low budgets and long hours contribute to workers being seriously injured or killed on the job.

Also in November, two USPS postal workers, Nick Acker, 36, and Russell Scruggs Jr, 44, were killed on the job just a week apart. USPS workers are being pushed harder in preparation for the holiday season, and these workers died because safety precautions were ignored. At UPS, Shelma Rayna, 43, mother of 5, was crushed to death by packages while working in the back of a truck. A UPS plane in Louisville, KY caught fire and crashed during the shutdown, killing over a dozen workers (see *New Day at USPS #3* and *New Day at UPS #35* and #36).

These workers’ deaths should be seen for what they are: murders. The movie studios showed us how long hours kill workers who drive home tired, like Brent Hershman in 1997, a crew worker on *Hysteria* in 2023 (not named in the press), and Rico Priem in 2024. Other workers were killed when safety precautions were not followed on set: Sarah Jones in 2014; Halyna Hutchins in 2021; and Juan “Spike” Osorio in 2024.

On the surface, the live events industry is booming. According to *Forbes*, “independent live venues, festivals and promoters” alone produced \$86.2 billion to the United States GDP in 2024, more than the US beer, gaming and airline industries. “Arts and cultural economic activity” was 4.2% of the US GDP as of 2023, or \$1.17 trillion. That’s over \$400,000 for each of the 2.6 million workers in our industry. Meanwhile, again pointed out by *New Day at UPS*, Americans’ collective spending power is about \$16.5 trillion compared to the total GDP of \$27 trillion. This is the real cause of the economic crisis: we are producing more than we can consume, which means corporate profits will never be realized in sales. This is the reason for mass layoffs and why we’re all being pushed to work harder,

longer days – to subsidize falling profits.

Between the pressure put on us as event workers, the poor planning from management, and the long hours we put in around dangerous machinery, *it is only a matter a time before the same happens to one of us*. By organizing an independent union, we take an important step toward preventing this.

Why we criticize IATSE

Some readers might wonder why we spend so much time criticizing IATSE if only 6% of event workers are unionized.

The basic reason is this: As soon you decide you want to do something about your bad conditions at work, the first question to answer is who your friends and enemies are. So is IATSE, the legal entity, its officers and paid staff, our friend or our enemy?

The answer might not be obvious. The IATSE 70th convention took place this year in Hawaii, a US colony. We see a lot of “educated” political language in the resolutions they passed (“we must continue our commitment to ... Black, Indigenous, People of Color, Latinx, women, people with different physical abilities, and LGBTQ+ individuals...”). A few even pay lip service to opposing ICE raids.

This is nothing more than a disguise. We have to look at the facts: No concrete action for fighting ICE was proposed in these resolutions, just internal anti-discrimination policies, lobbying and donating to politicians. IATSE is an organization with 168,000 members, whose national body owns over \$100 million in assets and brings in between \$60-100 million every year. They could be putting tens of millions annually into strike funds at the international and local levels. Their whole membership could go on strike against ICE repression and use their numbers and assets to start massive fundraising campaigns to support striking workers financially. This is the kind of thing unions used to do. Instead, IATSE spent \$20 million of its members’ money this year on new investments and fixed assets, and put \$0 into their international strike fund, just like they do every year. So why won’t they do anything?

Criticism brings us closer to finding real solutions. To answer this question, we need to look at their methods.

How the state unions “organize”

First of all, if you’re not a stagehand or tech, you can forget about IATSE, since they won’t represent you: production assistants on movies are turning to LiUNA (laborers) and workers

at a few venues in D.C. are going to Unite Here. Splitting ourselves up like this is totally counterproductive. But it's not just IATSE that's the problem, it's the legal labor system as a whole.

The first thing IATSE, or Unite Here, or LiUNA, or any other legal union will tell us to do is sign a petition. We would be limited to only organizing at one company at a time, which makes part-timers' fate unclear. If we get >30% of all workers at one company like Flyspace to sign it, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) will hold an election at work or by mail.

If we lose, the NLRB won't let us try again for an entire year. If we win, and the company recognizes the union (not a given), then begins a long, drawn-out process of bargaining "in good faith," where things stay the same, but the union staffers will stop us from organizing walkouts or strikes during negotiations. The best the union can do is file "unfair labor practice" grievances with the NLRB if the company violates labor law, and if they say it's okay, *then* we get to strike.

Except not really. Political strikes and solidarity strikes (e.g. for Palestine, or to support other striking workers), "intermittent striking," "secondary boycotts," and other actions are all illegal according to US labor law.

This is exactly what is happening to the Starbucks baristas: At one store in Pittsburgh, striking baristas were offered an entire \$10/hour for every hour they picket while on strike, for a max of 5 hours a day. Baristas at some stores were even told they could only strike for a week because of rules against "intermittent striking" that are impossible to understand without a degree in labor law. What happened to the indefinite strike their union promised them?

Bargaining would almost certainly take years, not months. It took IATSE Local 114 in Portland, Maine 1 year of negotiations and 2 years of organizing work to get a contract at the State Theatre. No details of this contract are available on Local 114's website or the IATSE national site. It took Local 3 over 2 years of negotiating before they finally got a contract at the History Center, and by that point almost everyone involved in the original organizing effort had either quit or been fired.

During negotiations, the union will pressure us to accept a "no-strike clause" that would bar us from striking again until the contract expires (again, this happened to Starbucks baristas). This gives the company years to prepare. And every step of the way, the company would have countless opportunities for legal recourse (and illegal tricks) that can delay negotiations. If our boss violates labor law, basically nothing happens to them, but if we violate labor law, they send the cops.

And all of this is based on the false premise that the National Labor Relations Board is some kind of impartial body, instead of a government body appointed by representatives of capitalism. Specifically it is part of the executive branch and directly influenced by the White House. This has been true since Public Resolution No. 44 (1934) that allowed the President to appoint a labor board and Trump's Executive Order 14215 and the purges of the Department of Labor only confirm this.

What we want instead: class-conscious unionism

Participation in the NLRB process is pessimistic, it's like saying we can't organize under our own power and we need to rely on the federal government during a time when American

imperialism is weaker and more disorganized than ever.

How did we get here? There have always been opportunists in the labor movement (you could think of opportunism as "selling out," focusing on narrow, short-term interests and even personal gain instead of the long-term interests of all workers). Opportunism is the thinking of capitalists within our ranks. It demoralizes, splits and confuses us. This is why we need a newsletter and other forms of political education. In the 1800s when companies started making their own "unions" to trick the workers, genuine union organizers had to expose them. When the American Federation of Labor collaborated with employers and defended capitalism, they had to be exposed, too. The same is true of the state unions today.

What we want is a union that fights for power, class-against-class. We don't need a class of property owners to exploit us. Every worker already knows that the people who work should be the ones who make the decisions. We have to clean up the messes made by our managers who sit in an office all day and have no idea how the work gets done. If we take key people from every part of the live event production process, bring in as many part-timers as possible, and convene meetings to do some research and put our heads together, we can certainly come up with a better strike plan than whatever union staffers with degrees in labor relations tell us to do. Who knows our industry better than we do? I mean, *really* knows it?

The new unions we create will become essential tools for directing industry by making economic plans and transforming our society into a democratic one, thereby eliminating economic crises, unemployment, homelessness and other problems. This how the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China worked for their first few decades. Unions are not the *only* thing we need to do this, but we can't do it without them.

Many people may feel pessimistic about socialism because the socialist revolutions in these countries were reversed. It's important to remember that it was the same opportunism we are struggling against now that was ultimately responsible for restoring capitalism, not some "fatal flaw" inherent to socialism or "human nature." Feudalism was also restored many times after capitalist revolutions in Europe before capitalism became the world economic system.

We are part of a broader movement

We have fellow workers in the New Labor Organizing Committee at Amazon, UPS, and USPS, in restaurants, coffee shops, among educators and gig workers. Workers in these other industries have already offered to pitch in to start a strike fund and help us with fundraising if we decide to strike. Groups in US cities that share our politics like the People's Defense Committees and Revolutionary Student Unions are also willing to support us. We should cooperate with any activists and community members who respect our decision to organize independently. We don't have to do it alone.



Strike the Stage is a newsletter written by event production workers to unite our coworkers against the production company owners, promoters, venue owners and operators who control our industry, and against their agents in IATSE. We are a member organization of the New Labor Organizing Committee. Our long-term goal is to create a revolutionary, industry-wide live event workers' union.