

JOBS > LABOR



## ‘Abbott Elementary’ stars and local working actors came together on Philly’s SAG-AFTRA picket line: ‘Enough is enough’

SAG-AFTRA Philadelphia was joined by 'Abbott Elementary' stars Sheryl Lee Ralph and Lisa Ann Walter, veteran actor David Morse, and local elected officials and labor leaders at a rally in LOVE Park.



Actors Sheryl Lee Ralph (left) and Lisa Ann Walter, both from "Abbott Elementary," attended the SAG-AFTRA rally in Love Park on Thursday.

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by Lizzy McLellan Ravitch and Punya Bhasin  
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Lisa Ann Walter now stars in a hit television show, and she has appeared in a number of popular films over the last few decades.

But, the actor recalled Thursday at a rally in Center City Philadelphia, raising her four children in Los Angeles earlier in her career meant shopping the day-old bread rack at the bakery and the dollar store for birthday party supplies.

“When the world sees people on television and movies, they figure they’ve got it made; they’re all millionaires; they have several yachts,” Walter said.

“As the years have gone on, the business has paid those of us who are not the \$20 million actors less and less and less until it is just about basic wage,” Walter said

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At this point her career, Walter can negotiate a fair contract for herself, she noted while standing next to her *Abbott Elementary* costar Sheryl Lee Ralph. But she and Ralph are on strike in support of the many working actors in their union who struggle to make ends meet, they both said.

“This is not about your favorite stars on TV or in motion pictures,” Ralph told the crowd Thursday. “Eighty percent of our union is made up of plain old ordinary people trying to make a living.”

A SAG-AFTRA rally in Philadelphia on Thursday included celebrity actors with ties to the Philly region, as well as dozens of working actors. They’re all [on](#)

strike after failing to reach a deal with major film and television companies last week.

Also attending in support were several members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and various other local labor unions, as well as workers from of the Writers Guild of America, whose 11,000 members have been on strike since May.

”For the first time since the 1960s both unions said enough is enough and we demand more,” Ralph said.

**‘Working to be middle class’**

Most members of the local union are “working to be middle class, the ones who are middle class are working to keep it,” said Nicole Izanec, president of SAG-AFTRA Philadelphia.

”Qualifying for health care every year isn’t a given by any means” because union members must make at least \$26,470 from their acting work in a given year to be eligible for coverage.

Those members are the workers the union is striking for, said Ralph, who is on the union’s negotiating committee. And they’re the members most affected by loss of income from the strike, she added.

“Do not think that we take this lightly because in any strike, somebody gets hurt,” Ralph said. “In any strike, there will be those who find it hard to make a living.”

Members who took to the microphone talked about the impact of streaming services on their income and the threat posed by artificial intelligence to working actors’ future income.

[SAG-AFTRA leaders have said](#) the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers proposed that it would use AI to scan background actors and use their likenesses in future projects, all in exchange for one day of pay.

“The studios want to make us poorer and themselves richer,” said David Morse, a veteran actor whose film work includes *The Green Mile*, the Philadelphia-shot *12 Monkeys*, and *The Hurt Locker* and the television series *Hack*, about a Philadelphia taxi driver.

“There was always an excuse as to why they couldn’t make our lives better,” Morse said. “AI is the excuse now.”

## **'Being squeezed out'**

Kisha Barr joined SAG-AFTRA union six years ago. After earning more than 30 film and television credits, she said, she still doesn't qualify for health insurance. She does deliveries for Instacart and DoorDash to get by.

"With all these new streaming platforms and shows, I am auditioning for those more and more, and even when I book one, I keep thinking, 'What am I going to even earn from this in the future?'" Barr said.

"I get comments like, 'Oh my gosh, you're big time now,' and I have to explain to them that just cause I made it on TV doesn't actually mean that I've made it," Barr said.

Another member, Helen McNutt, said that more protections had been in place for actors to earn a livable wage when she joined SAG-AFTRA more than 25 years ago. The rise of new technology, including AI, worries her.

"We're all being squeezed out of this industry, and, of course, we are going to strike because now the production companies have found a way to use our images without paying us for it," McNutt said.

Barr is worried about her finances while on strike, she said, but she understands that the work stoppage is necessary to ensure her income and place in the industry in the long term.

”If we don’t strike and fight back now,” she said, “then the people at the top are just going to keep making millions of dollars and leaving nothing for the rest of us.”

Member Jay Mass recalled numerous times when, instead of paying him, studios offered food or suggested he do the work “for the experience.”

In some instances, he said, he has had to travel to far-off locations without reimbursement for gas or lodging.

”There have been so many times where instead of a paycheck, I have had to take a pay loss, just to keep working in the industry,” Mass said. “I’ve had to question countless times whether I even want to stay in the industry or if it’s worth it anymore.”

While SAG-AFTRA represents 160,000 members across the country, including roughly 3,000 in the Philadelphia region, [not all of them are affected by the strike.](#)

The work stoppage includes the 65,000 actors from television and film productions who voted to authorize a strike.

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