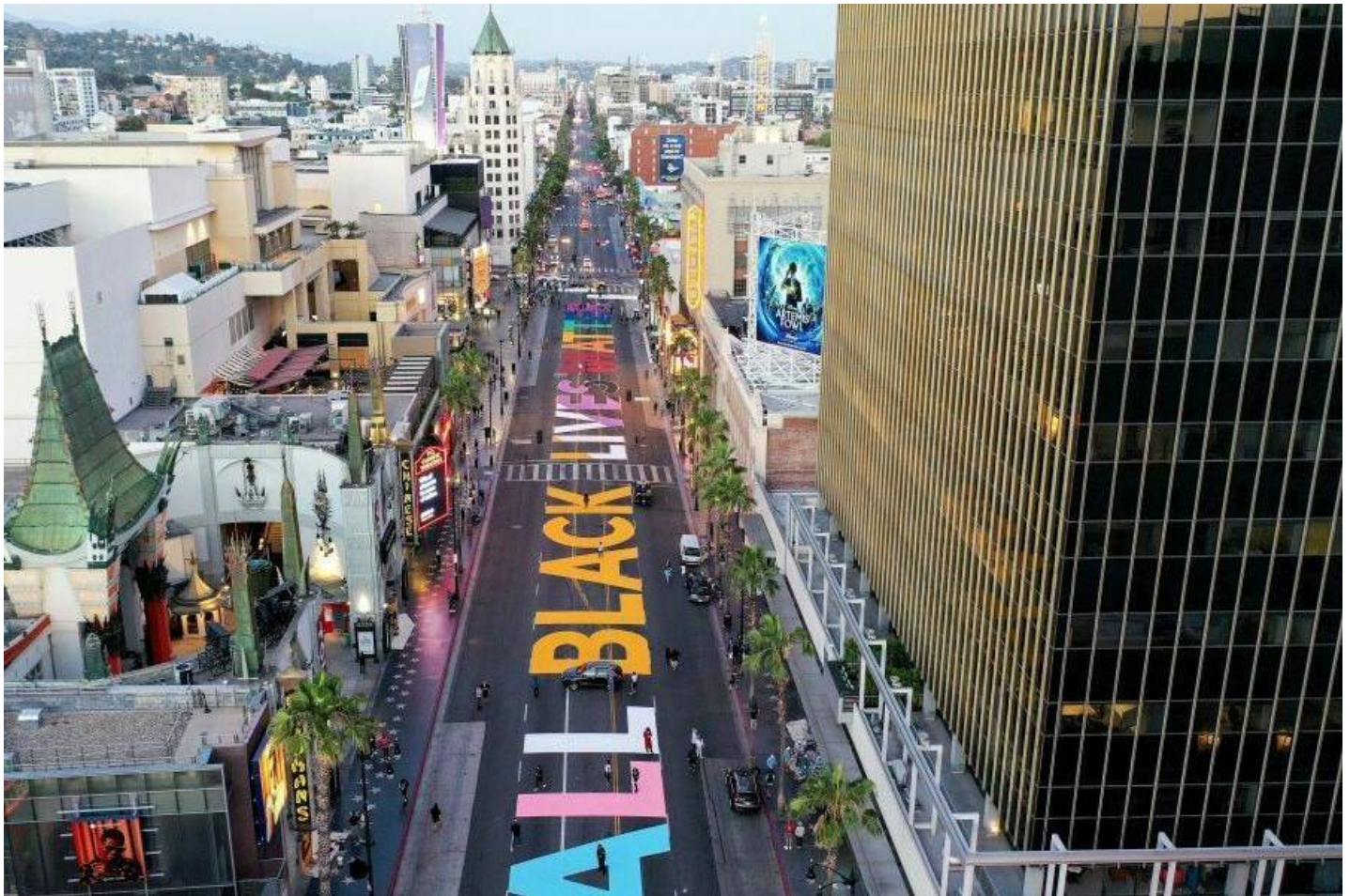


LABOR

Organizing Against Police Unions Has Invigorated Hollywood's Labor Movement, Members Say

ALICE HERMAN

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Hollywood Boulevard is painted with the words "All Black Lives Matter" as protests continue in the wake of George Floyd's death on June 13, 2020 in Los Angeles. (Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images)

The labor movement is split on the question of cops. While union officials have signaled their tempered support for police unions, the push to expel law enforcement from the movement has grown quickly in the rank-and-file.

The Writers Guild of America, East (WGAE) led the way with a June 8 resolution urging the AFL-CIO to drop the International Union of Police Associations (IUPA). Nine days later, the Martin Luther King, Jr. County Labor Council, an AFL-CIO regional affiliate, voted to expel the Seattle Police Officers Guild from

the coalition. Union shops representing postdoc researchers and teaching assistants have since passed resolutions demanding police union disaffiliation from the AFL-CIO, and a coalition of workers within the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) have put forward a similar call to expel its police union affiliates.

Except the WGAE, no national unions within the AFL-CIO have positioned themselves against police unions beyond calling for the IUPA—a union representing over 100,000 officers across the United States—to reform itself. But a movement is brewing in two large Hollywood unions.

Within the ranks of two unions representing theater and entertainment workers—International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA)—the push to kick police out of the AFL-CIO has ballooned in the span of a few weeks, with members of each union saying that the effort has pushed them to consider, some for the first time, the power they possess as unionized workers.

Taking inspiration from the WGAE, Nicholas Monsour, a television and film editor credited on “Us” and “The Twilight Zone,” wrote a petition urging his union, IATSE, to pass a resolution calling for the ouster of police unions from the AFL-CIO. The petition has been shared widely on social media, garnering hundreds of signatures and bringing together a coalition of IATSE members organizing around the “drop cops” campaign.

Another editor represented by IATSE, who preferred not to be named for fear of retaliation from the Los Angeles Police Department, says he joined the campaign because he has seen the police indiscriminately target Black people and “[has] relatives who have been mistreated by the police.”

“There’s IATSE members who actually get mistreated by the police, and I think we should look out for them,” he says. “Being a person of color in IATSE, I love being a union member, I love the benefits and my coworkers, and I would love more if we used our power to make the community a better place.”

He adds, “I’m very encouraged to see these actions happening, and I hope that union leadership listens to its grassroots.”

Members say the push has also had the secondary effect of pulling union members into union politics who might not have participated otherwise; in the fight for the Black Lives Matter movement, rank-and-file members have found and exercised their union power.

“The culture when I joined [was] a little bit sleepy,” Monsour says. “I’m a dues paying member who has occasionally gotten slightly more involved in our discussions and meetings around contract negotiations but I’ve never sought any positions or anything within the guild, the union.”

Through the campaign, interest in the structure and leadership of the organization has grown among members who were less involved in union politics before this month.

“I wasn’t day-to-day involved in Local 700 stuff, but ... knowing that IATSE is part of the AFL-CIO and that [the International Union of Police Associations] is part of AFL-CIO too, a lot of this is definitely new to me,” said editor and producer John Cantú.

“Everyone that I’ve been in touch with has been just like me, where they had no idea that IATSE was part of the AFL-CIO and that police unions were also tied into that.”

Alexis Simpson, an actor and member of SAG-AFTRA, says that the parallel push within her union has yielded a comparably strong increase in union activism. “I would say I’m probably more engaged in union stuff than most of the membership. And that’s not saying much ... the number of people [to whom] I have said, ‘Hey, did you know that we’re affiliated with the police unions?’ who are like, ‘What? I did not know that.’ It is waking them up to learning more about their union, at least at that initial level.”

In each union, members started their respective campaigns by circulating petitions. While gathering signatories and connecting with interested members, the member-organizers simultaneously pressured leadership to take a position against police unions. Members of each organization say they have coordinated efforts on internal message boards and launched internal campaigns to demonstrate popular support for expelling the police from the labor movement. Meanwhile, SAG-AFTRA member-organizers have partnered with Color of Change, an organization that has rallied against racism in the criminal justice system and media.

There’s precedent for the action they are calling for: In 1957, the AFL-CIO expelled the Teamsters from the federation for corruption and unethical practices.

Both SAG-AFTRA and IATSE have issued statements in response to the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department and the movement to end police brutality that has ensued. But neither has gone so far as to actually call for the expulsion of police from the AFL-CIO.

A June 11 statement from SAG-AFTRA calls on police unions to “dismantle the structures they have erected that have been used to protect officers who engage in racially targeted violence, racial profiling, and other racist and unlawful conduct towards Black and other citizens of this country.” It’s an argument that mirrors the logic of AFL-CIO’s original statement on police brutality by condemning discrete acts of violence while maintaining that the police unions are capable of changing course.

But cop unions have long formed an ardent opposition to police reform, providing legal cover for killer cops and quashing efforts to increase transparency. And IUPA reacted to the labor federation’s statement on police reform with outrage: In a letter to AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka, Sam Cabral, the head of IUPA, called the idea that brutality is endemic to policing “ridiculous.”

Leaders of the 55 unions in the AFL-CIO have skirted the question of expelling cop unions from the labor movement or outwardly rejected the idea. But as calls from the rank-and-file grow, so will the pressure for their representatives, in unions representing workers across industries, to respond.



ALICE HERMAN is a 2020-2021 Leonard C. Goodman Institute for Investigative Reporting Fellow with *In These Times*.

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