

What’s going on?

On April 13, 2005, ACTRA National and ACTRA Toronto signed an alliance and services agreement with the United Steelworkers. The “alliance” means the two unions are going to look for ways to work together and to protect each other’s jurisdictions. The “services agreement” means the two unions are going to look for ways to cooperate on public policy, organizing, training of staff, and contract research among other areas.

Why now?

ACTRA Toronto’s current Operating Plan calls for an outreach to other unions to help protect our jurisdiction and to extend the reach and capability of our political action campaigns. Preliminary conversations between ACTRA Toronto and the USW about organizational issues opened the door to a much broader and more exciting vision of opportunities at the national level.

Why is ACTRA entering into a strategic alliance with USW?

Our industry has undergone enormous changes. Thirty years ago, the CBC was the principal employer of our members and, consequently, ACTRA’s principal counter-party at the bargaining table. Today, the film and television industry is a fully globalized business and our negotiating teams are bargaining, directly or indirectly, with vertically-integrated multi-national media companies, usually based in the United States.

We are exploring ways to take advantage of the USW’s considerable influence and experience in lobbying and bargaining to assist our own public policy and collective bargaining work.

It is also worth noting too that, as we have become an effective competitor in the international film business, we have attracted the attention of other players who have sought from time to time, either to organize in our jurisdiction or to attempt to disrupt production here in order to drive work elsewhere. The strategic alliance gives ACTRA a measure of confidence in facing such organizational challenges.

What does ACTRA get out of this partnership?

This alliance is an international extension of ACTRA’s well-established policy of building partnerships to focus as many resources as possible on current challenges to our working terms and conditions.

In Ontario, this policy guided ACTRA Toronto’s strong commitment to the Film Ontario coalition which resulted in a terrific win for the entire industry – the effects of which are still spreading across Canada, as province after province moves to follow suit. At the national level, the Canadian Coalition of Audio Visual Unions (CCAU) and the recently formed Canadian Film and Television Industry Council (CFTIC) are two more examples of industry partnerships that are mobilizing around regulatory policy.

The USW is a powerful ally with a well-established track record in political action, coalition building, organizing, collective bargaining, staff and member education and a

deep commitment to fighting globalization with globalization. In Canada alone the USW represents the interests of 250,000 Canadian workers through the use of targeted political action campaigns. These workers are not only potential allies in the struggle to get our message to government. They are also taxpayers whose contributions have funded a highly regulated and subsidized broadcast system which has utterly failed to deliver on the promise of the Broadcast Act – to let Canadians tell their own stories on their own airwaves. This alliance gives us a golden opportunity to insert a cultural message into the labour agenda.

Why the Steelworkers and not some other large union?

ACTRA has a long-standing relationship with USW – they have represented our staff since the mid-1980s. We are like-minded organizations with a focus on both public policy and organizing and bargaining. Finally, the USW is strong in both Canada and the United States. That makes them attractive alliance partners since more than half of the work in Canada in our industry comes from companies headquartered in the U.S.

The USW is familiar with strategic alliances – it has eleven others with unions around the world.

What is the USW?

The United Steel Workers is the largest private sector union in North America, with a highly diversified membership that includes not only manufacturing and industrial workers but also an increasing number of employees in the service industry. We like the fact that ACTRA and the USW are like-minded on many issues. We like their size and depth of resources. We like that they operate at a global scale just like many of our employers do.

Does this “strategic alliance” mean that ACTRA is merging with the USW?

No. A merger or affiliation agreement with another organization would require changes to our constitution and by-laws and would require ratification by the membership.

This strategic alliance is an agreement that creates a forum for our two organizations to exchange ideas and to support each other’s efforts in areas of mutual interest and also defines a mechanism that allows us to share resources and work together in pursuit of common goals.

Like the highly successful Film Ontario coalition that convinced the Ontario Government to live up to its promises and raise the film & television tax credits, this alliance is another example of our successful pattern of partnership building.

Will we need to be steelworkers to be actors now?

ACTRA is remaining ACTRA. Nothing changes in our constitution or our contracts. We are still fully independent. We have simply added another alliance to grow our strength.

What does the USW get out of this partnership?

As a result of this alliance, ACTRA will play a more active role at the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and we are not an insignificant ally. As one of the fifteen largest unions in the Congress, voting our own delegates, with a voice on the Council and represented on its committees, we will potentially increase the influence of the USW’s network of “like-minded” unions by approximately ten percent. The USW has also expressed interest in making use of ACTRA national’s developing research capabilities as well as learning from us about organizing independent workers and negotiating and administering collective agreements on their behalf – our special area of expertise.

Are we going to be making any payments to the USW?

If the USW decides to take advantage of the services agreement and to borrow ACTRA staff for projects, they will be making payments to ACTRA. If ACTRA likewise decided to borrow resources from the USW (for example, organizers) we would cover the associated costs. Otherwise there are no fees or charges contemplated in this agreement.

What has been agreed about the Canadian Labour Congress?

ACTRA is going to take its proper place at the CLC after a long absence, and we are going to re-enter the CLC with our full membership in partnership with the USW so that we aren’t alone within the Congress in advocating for our issues.

There is an extra cost associated with this decision. Paying our full dues will cost ACTRA approximately an additional \$120,000. ACTRA National and ACTRA Toronto have agreed to co-fund the new, higher CLC dues 50-50.

What is the CLC?

The Canadian Labour Congress is the national voice of the Canadian labour movement. ACTRA has been a member of the CLC for more than thirty years. A decade ago we stepped away from the CLC as a cost-cutting measure. From a position of strength thanks to this alliance with a major affiliate, ACTRA is now planning to take a leadership role within the CLC and will be looking for new allies on our cultural issues.

What does all of this mean for an average ACTRA member?

It means that ACTRA, their union, will be extending its reach, expanding its access to skill training and other resources, and will be tackling its work with the benefit of a growing set of alliances.

We’re going to keep working on our members’ priorities – like the need for more Canadian domestic drama – in a stronger coalition of like-minded unions.

What does this alliance mean to ACTRA’s negotiations with producers?

Nothing has changed with our collective agreements. ACTRA will continue to negotiate with producers within the same legal framework we always have.

On the other hand, much might change in the way ACTRA approaches difficult bargaining situations, as this alliance builds the power and effectiveness of our union. ACTRA will have access to significantly enhanced training and resources that will be relevant should producers fail to be reasonable at the bargaining table.

Isn’t it true that some of our ACTRA staff members are represented by the USW? What effect will this strategic alliance have on our staff agreements?

The USW members on ACTRA’s staff will remain USW members, protected by their agreement and supported in their bargaining with us by the USW. If this ever becomes a serious issue between the USW and ACTRA, we’ll both have to reassess the alliance.

What do the Steelworkers know about Canadian cultural issues?

Not nearly as much as they are about to learn! Leading on Canadian cultural issues is OUR job.

The USW is a highly diversified union that speaks out on issues affecting working people in many sectors. They have been leaders in the fight to preserve Canada’s public healthcare system. To them we are an important, well-organized and highly motivated sector of the labour force that has become a strong voice in the debate on Canadian cultural policy – an issue of interest to the 250,000 USW members who are Canadian taxpayers.

While the players in our industry may be new to them, they have a deep understanding of the impact of globalization on local employment and a wealth of experience in getting a message delivered on Parliament Hill. What we stand to gain from working with the USW is an increased reach and power in our campaigns; security and stability in our jurisdiction; and a chance to learn from a large and successful union so that we can do a better job for our members.

Why am I hearing about this after the fact? Doesn’t a strategic alliance require ratification by the members?

The alliance documents contain very strict and unambiguous language that protects ACTRA’s identity, independence, autonomy, constitution, bylaws, assets and membership. This strategic alliance is neither a merger nor an affiliation. It is a time-limited, non-binding agreement that spells out ways that our organizations have chosen to work together on a case-by-case basis. It is an administrative arrangement and, as such, it does not require ratification any more than does our participation in other partnerships like Film Ontario, the Canadian Coalition of Audio Visual Unions of the Canadian Film and Television Industry Council.

What are the terms of the agreement?

The full text of the agreement can be viewed on the ACTRA Toronto website (www.actratoronto.com). Section A includes a brief introductory paragraph about ACTRA and the USW, outlines our shared history and introduces the alliance as an agreement that:

...provides thee to unions with an opportunity to support each other and to work together on issues of common interest.

This new relationship, while preserving the autonomy and independence of both unions, provides them with a real-world forum to exchange ideas, define areas of mutual interest, and develop cooperative strategies as well as a mechanism for the sharing of resources in the pursuit of common aims.

Does this mean that ACTRA is on strike when the USW is on strike?

No. As separate organizations with separate constitutions, agreements, memberships and jurisdictions we will each continue to operate as we have always done with the added option of sharing resources on a case-by-case basis.

The USW represents workers in lots of different industries. What if I was shooting on location and there was a USW picket line?

In principle it is always a good idea to respect a picket line.

That said, if the engager is not in violation of your contract you are obligated to perform the services specified and may cross a picket line to do so. As an ACTRA member you are neither a Steelworker nor a worker in their jurisdiction. You are not obligated to risk your personal safety, however, and on those grounds you may refuse to cross the line.

How will we manage disagreements or differences of opinion with USW?

Pretty much the way we do now. As fully independent and autonomous organizations with separate constitutions and memberships we can simply agree to disagree.