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With Hollywood on Strike, a Bright Spot in New York's Economy Goes Dark

Tens of thousands of behind-the-scenes workers, in solidarity with striking actors and writers, are bracing for what could be a monthslong standoff with the studios.



By Stefanos Chen

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By day, Ryan Quinlan handles the desk lamps, sconces and chandeliers that appear in films and television shows. At night, he rents out props from his Brooklyn warehouse, like an Egyptian sarcophagus and a taxidermy leopard. On the side, he acts and does stunts.

All of that work came to an abrupt halt last week, when the Hollywood actors' union, SAG-AFTRA, with 36,000 members in the New York area, announced a strike for the first time in 43 years, in pursuit of better pay and safeguards against artificial intelligence. It joined the screenwriters union, the Writers Guild of America, which has been on strike since May.

"This shut down all of my streams of income," Mr. Quinlan, 44, said. "There is nobody not touched."

While Los Angeles is the epicenter for film and TV in the United States, New York has long staked its claim as Hollywood East, and the standoff is already taking a toll on tens of thousands of workers in one of the city's fastest-growing industries.

But it's not just actors and writers who are out of work. With both the studios and unions expecting a drawn-out battle, everyone from makeup artists and costume designers to carpet dealers and foam sculptors is preparing to perhaps go for months without working, at a time when many are still recovering from the pandemic.

"For the people who are your everyday, technical workers, it's going to be devastating," said Cathy Marshall, the head of the East Coast chapter of the Set Decorators Society of America, a large trade group.

Even so, she and most workers in the industry support the actors' demands, which focus in part on their contention that union members are not receiving a fair share of the studios' streaming revenue. The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, a union representing more than 168,000 behind-the-scenes workers, declared last week its "stalwart support" for the actors' and writers' strikes.

The actors join a growing national wave of labor groups, including hotel workers, writers and delivery workers, who have demanded higher wages and benefits in recent months.

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The strikes could have an outsized economic effect on New York City, where film and TV productions in 2019 supported more than 185,000 jobs, including work in ancillary industries like legal services, truck rental and food catering, according to the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment.

From 2004 to 2019, thanks in part to New York State tax incentives for production companies, the industry directly added 35,000 jobs, outpacing the citywide job growth rate.

In 2022, the latest year data was available, the average salary for jobs in the industry in New York City was \$173,500, or 49 percent higher than the average private work force job, said James Parrott, the director of economic and fiscal policy at the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School. Many actors and technicians are paid well below the average, he said, and lower-paid independent contractors are not included in the average.

But with all but a handful of film and TV projects paused indefinitely, anxiety is rising.

Jessica Heyman owns Art for Film, a specialty prop house in the Brooklyn Navy Yard that brokers the rights to use art in film and TV productions, ranging from enormous paintings to children's refrigerator doodles.

Her company provided almost all the art displayed in the headquarters of Waystar Royco, the corporate backdrop for the hit drama "Succession," according to George DeTitta Jr., the show's set decorator.



Jessica Heyman, who owns a specialty prop house in Brooklyn, recently signed a lease for a larger warehouse. For her, the strike is “the worst possible timing.” Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

After a slowdown in demand that started before the strikes, Ms. Heyman said she was worried about the lease she signed for a bigger warehouse in April.

“It’s the worst possible timing,” she said. “I haven’t been sleeping much.”

A bit of help has come from superfans of “Succession” — like one client from Oslo, who ordered an abstract geometric print shown during a confrontation between the characters Shiv and Matsson — but it’s not enough.

Instead, she is looking to sublet a portion of her 3,500-square-foot space or do some art consulting work for hotels.

Until recently, the industry has also been a boon to more workaday businesses. Christina Constantinou and her mother, Eleanor Kazas, the owners of Carpet Time, a flooring store in Woodside, Queens, gradually moved from a 2,000-square-foot shop to a 20,000-square-foot showroom, thanks to film industry clients.

“Nobody wants to come to a store and buy anymore,” Ms. Constantinou said — except set decorators looking for the perfect *mise-en-scène*. “It’s the majority of our business.”

Her clients are connoisseurs of what she calls “beautiful ugly”: a kitschy casino-themed carpet with a playing card motif used on “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel”; drab linoleum tiles used on creep-of-the-week cop shows; white carpet to accentuate blood spatter.



A carpet used on "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel" was provided by Carpet Time, a Queens flooring store whose owners fear the effects of a prolonged shutdown.
via Carpet Time

Ms. Constantinou, who is sympathetic to the unions, budgeted for three months of slower work after the writers' strike began in May, but fears that the standoff could stretch much longer.

"At least through Covid, we had P.P.P. loans, but we're not in a union, and I know a lot of these small businesses are really suffering," she said.

Helen Uffner, the owner of a 50,000-piece collection of vintage clothing, one of the best regarded in the film industry, has decided, for only the second time since opening in 1978, to close her showroom indefinitely; the first time was during the height of the pandemic.

"When we're sitting there, and the phone only rings once, and it's a wrong number, then the writing is on the walls," she said.



Helen Uffner, who owns a celebrated collection of vintage clothing that she rents out to productions, has decided to close her showroom indefinitely, though she is still taking appointments. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

For some industry tradespeople, the strike presents other risks. A prolonged stoppage could lead to the suspension of health care plans for some workers, whose benefits are tied to hours worked, according to a spokesman for IATSE, the behind-the-scenes entertainment workers union, which has about 15,000 members in the film and TV sector in the New York area.

The Entertainment Community Fund, a nonprofit aid group for industry workers, said it had given about \$1.7 million in emergency grants to more than 1,000 film and TV workers since the writers' strike began in May.

Still, for Mr. Quinlan, the electrician and stuntman, reaching an acceptable contract with the studios is worth the pain.

He comes from a long line of theatrical union members: His uncle was a cinematographer; his cousins are grips and film set electricians; and his father, Ray Quinlan, is a producer of the series "Godfather of Harlem."

"My whole family is out of work," he said, adding that they had hunkered down for the long haul. "I hope everyone saved for this rainy day, because it's pouring."

Stefanos Chen is a real estate reporter, based in New York. He joined The Times in 2017 after five years with The Wall Street Journal, where he was a reporter and multimedia producer. More about Stefanos Chen