

## At the Big Table

I recently took time out from my national barnstorming tour of Equity centennial celebrations to attend the quadrennial convention in Boston of the IA. The IA is the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees, and they are the folks who work with us and alongside us as stage hands, dressers, publicists, box office staff, hairdressers, ushers, and company managers. IA members also work on film and TV sets as gaffers, grips, makeup artists, cinematographers, etc.

Matt Loeb, the international president of the IA had invited me to speak, and I thought it only fair to share the pain -- AEA members should not be the only ones to have to suffer from a Nick Wyman speech.

The tenor of my speech was that we are Family. We are Brothers and Sisters (a locution commonly used at the IA and many other unions) in the Family of Labor. This is a bit of a change from past AEA attitudes towards Labor. From our very beginnings in 1913, there have been those at AEA who have been uncomfortable with the idea of aligning or identifying with the "workers" of Labor. "After all," I hear people say to this day, "we are creative artists, not laborers." I also hear people say, "Equity is so weak. Why aren't they strong like the IA." Well, I completely disagree that AEA is weak (talk to any number of producers who see us as a bully or the 500 pound gorilla), but clearly a coy, diffident or ambivalent attitude towards unionism on the part of one's members does not make for a strong union.

Regardless of how weak or strong we may be at the moment, we plan to be stronger as we move forward. After a history in which we connected circuitously and third-hand to the AFL through first the Four A's (Associated Actors and Artistes of America) and then through the Department of Professional Employees, we recently received a direct charter from the AFL-CIO. We are one of 57 labor unions with a seat at the big table. That's a great metaphor. Think of us as having graduated from the children's table to the adult's table at the Family of Labor's Thanksgiving dinner.

As part of our big-table presence, AEA leaders will attend this fall's AFL-CIO convention in Los Angeles. We will make connections. We will find future allies. We will learn strategies for dealing with employers, for dealing with technological innovation, for dealing with government regulation.

It is time to step up. We are asserting our standing as workers who deserve respect, fair wages, and protection. We are making the case that unions deserve support even from non-union workers because unions raise the working conditions and standards for everyone. If Adam Smith's "invisible hand" were truly allowed to control the marketplace, the laws of supply and demand would crush actors' salaries and reduce our compensation to a pittance. Acting would become a sideline, a dilettante's pastime, the province everywhere of amateurs.

We are professionals, and it is Actors' Equity that makes this a profession. Those non-union actors whom we frequently refer to as non-professional -- but who see themselves as professional because they make a salary -- owe that putative professionalism entirely to AEA because without our force and efforts in the marketplace, those salaries would shrink to the vanishing point. Unions work for every worker not just the union member. We are casting off whatever ambivalence we may have had in the past about whether we are workers or artists. We are workers. We are union. We are proud. We are carrying that identity of proud union workers into our next century. Excelsior!