

One Voice: 50,058 Strong

Actors' Equity just broke through the threshold of 50,000 active members -- 50,058 is the figure as of this writing. Despite my megalomaniacal plans for world domination (witness our three new Equity buildings), I am not in a crazed rush to push us over the 50,000 mark -- not that I don't want the AFL-CIO secret decoder ring that I've heard Rich Trumka gives union presidents who have 50,000 members. What I want, rather than more members, is more work for the members we have.

Something like 18,000 of our 50,000 members work in a given year. Some have 52 work-weeks (or more!) and some have one or two work-weeks. Adding more members won't add more work-weeks. We are ever on the lookout for more Equity work: guiding nascent theater companies to Equity status, attempting to bring work that has gone non-Equity back to the Equity fold, and finding new areas of opportunity to organize non-union work.

All 50,058 of us have a voice in these efforts. You can call or write or e-mail the staff and/or your elected councillors and officers. You have an important voice, the only voice, in choosing the elected leaders who will speak for you. All 83 of your elected leaders voice their ideas and their concerns in the course of council and committee deliberations. Sometimes we disagree -- loudly. But with the broadest input possible, we make the best decisions for the greatest number of members; and then, when we speak publicly, we speak with one voice. A union of 50,058 different points of view that speaks as one: this is what gives us the strength of unity when we engage our bargaining partners.

In terms of membership, one of the quirks of Equity is that we don't choose or control who becomes an AEA member: our employers do. Some other unions have an apprentice and/or journeyman process, some have entrance exams, while others are open to anyone who wishes to pay the initiation fee. Aside from the side-door entrance policy by which members of our sister acting unions can join AEA, our offer of a membership card is contingent upon an employer's offer of a contract.

It's not easy to get that Equity contract when you don't yet have an Equity card. (It's not easy to get an Equity contract when you have an Equity card.) Consequently, members view that card (quite rightly) with pride as an insignia, a symbol of accomplishment, a talisman. Some of our nearly 50,000 "active" members are not actively pursuing stage work, but they keep their card and their active status out of solidarity and pride -- pride in their own accomplishment and pride in what our union stands for.

Your staff and your elected leaders are working to justify that pride. We are also working to raise that number of working members from 18,000 to 20,000 -- or 25,000. In our work, we speak publicly with one voice -- not the voice of the President, not the voice of the 83-member Council, not the voice of the 18,000 working members, but the one voice of the almost-50,000-member AEA. With a voice that strong, no one needs a decoder ring.