

## What Non-Members Need to Know About SAG-AFTRA

By Jonathan Handel | Posted April 25, 2012, 11:24 p.m.

It's new! It's bigger! It's hyphenated! It's SAG-AFTRA, and it's not quite the same as SAG or AFTRA. When the two unions merged last month after decades of discussion, they created a 160,000-member organization that combines bits and pieces of its predecessors. Look closely and you'll find the old and the new, mixed together, sometimes confusingly.

So what does this behemoth mean for you, the non-member? Most important – how do you get in?

**Getting Taft-Hartleyed.** One way a person is eligible, according to the SAG-AFTRA constitution, is if he or she “(h)as worked, is working or is about to work in a position covered by a SAG-AFTRA (or AFTRA or SAG) collective bargaining agreement.” In other words, once you book your first union gig, you're SAG-AFTRA eligible.

**That's right:** You don't have to be a member of the union to get that first union job. You do have to be a good actor, though, hardworking and lucky – but you knew that already. Getting in this way is sometimes referred to as being “Taft-Hartleyed,” which refers to part of the federal labor law.

**Background Vouchers.** The rule is different if you're working background. To get in that way, you “must have completed three (3) days of work as a background actor under a SAG-AFTRA (or AFTRA or SAG) collective bargaining agreement.” Some background positions on unions shows are considered union positions, and others are not. You'll get a voucher if you work a union background job, and your goal is to collect three vouchers.

**Upgrade to Principal.** If you're working a background job (or as an extra in a commercial), it's sometimes possible to be upgraded to principal – for instance, if you're directed to a line of dialogue. This is rare, but if it happens, not only do you get paid more, but it also makes you SAG-AFTRA eligible.

**Reciprocity.** Another way to get in is reciprocity. If you've been a member of Actors' Equity or one of three smaller performers unions (AGMA, AGVA, or GIAA) for one year and have performed as a principal in a production under one of those unions' contracts, you may be eligible to join SAG-AFTRA.

**New Media.** If you're really entrepreneurial, you can become a producer, finance a union production, and hire yourself. This is feasible if the production is for new media, and if your goal is to be a multitalented entertainment entrepreneur, it might be the right step for you. But if you don't have a head for business or a good partner, don't even consider it.

**Special cases.** Finally, if the National Board determines that you're “engaged in work that advances the (union's) active organizing efforts or general goals,” it can decide to admit you. Don't count on this one; the language is meant primarily to cover situations involving radio and TV broadcasters. (They, and recording artists, are covered by SAG-AFTRA in addition to actors.)

**No Open Admissions.** Notice what's gone: AFTRA's old “open admissions” policy. Unlike SAG, the TV-centric AFTRA was an open union. Anyone could join just by paying a fee, and when the unions merged, everyone in SAG or AFTRA, no matter how he or she had gotten in, automatically became a member of SAG-AFTRA.

But before you despair that you missed an easy backdoor into the new union, consider this: Not everyone who can join should. For some – maybe for you – it might be too early. That's because you're not just snagging a card – you're signing on to a set of rules. Among them are Global Rule One (formerly a SAG rule) and the “No Contract/No Work” rule (derived from AFTRA). The two are a bit different, but the bottom line is this: Once you're a member, you can't work nonunion gigs anymore.

That means nonunion movies, TV shows, commercials, Internet projects, student films, and even industrials are off-limits starting the moment you join. And it's called Global Rule One for a reason: Even if a show is shooting in Canada or overseas, you generally aren't allowed to accept the gig if it's nonunion.

That's OK, you might think, because if I join SAG-AFTRA today, I'll land an agent by tomorrow and be booking jobs the day after.

Sadly, it doesn't work that way. It's tough to get an agent and even harder to get booked on union jobs. If you don't have the chops and some good credits, the agent and the union jobs will be hard to come by – even with that coveted card. And no, the union won't help you find representation or get work. It's just not one of the things it does.

So, to build up those credits, you may need to keep working nonunion jobs – which you can't do once you've joined. Even SAG-AFTRA advises: “The time to join is when it makes sense for you. (Everyone's) situation is different.”

Translation: Ask your acting teachers, friends, mentors, and coaches for advice. Then consider your options carefully.

In some situations, though, you may have to join the union. If you work a union job and become SAG-AFTRA eligible, 30 days later you automatically become SAG-AFTRA Must-Pay. That means that before you work a second union job, you'll have to join. Producers are required to verify your status by checking with the union – a process that SAG rather quaintly called Station 12. Must-Pay applies in California, New York, and many other states but not in “right to work states” such as North Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, Texas, and other, mostly Republican states.

Once you're in, you'll be part of a new union that is almost 80 years old and fights for wages, working conditions, residuals, and pension-and-health benefits for its members. Be proud of that SAG-AFTRA card – you worked for it!

For more information, visit [SAGAFTRA.org](http://SAGAFTRA.org) and the legacy [aftra.com](http://aftra.com) and [sag.org](http://sag.org) websites.