

# Understanding SAG for the Extra

BY GARY MICHAEL SMITH  
GUEST COLUMNIST



Recently, a Screen Actors Guild representative was soliciting members at the Baton Rouge Film Industry

Meetup group. But many still have questions regarding whether or not they should join. In a nutshell, you have to be eligible, and while this article will not go into the nuances of membership qualifications since all information can be found at [www.sag.org](http://www.sag.org), some advice will be given.

SAG is for the benefit of professional actors who want to make a living from this craft. And as with any job, workers need benefits. Some of the important functions of SAG are to help in negotiating wages and working conditions, provide continuing education in

the form of workshops, and help out with retirement and healthcare issues. But before a film extra should jump on the union bandwagon, understand that SAG is a professional organization established to support actors. While

## AS AN EXTRA, YOU NEED TO FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU WANT OUT OF YOUR FILM CAREER

background actors are availed the opportunity to join, they should give serious thought to the consequences. For instance, once an individual becomes a SAG member, they are prohibited from working on non-SAG productions for non-SAG wages. The Guild

even suggests on their Web site FAQ page that individuals who discover that a SAG member is doing non-union work should contact the Legal Department. Moreover, the site states, "Members who are found in violation of these rules are subject to serious fines and discipline by a panel of union peers." So what does this mean for the minimum wage extra who wants to start working for more money? It means that you actually may get fewer jobs if you join SAG since production companies are not obligated to hire union extras. So, when given the choice of paying extras \$50 to \$75 a day for 8 or 10 hours respectively, or a union wage of several hundred dollars a day, it's not molecular genetics to figure out what they'll chose. Moreover, one casting coordinator even told me outright that she could not hire me for extra work in Louisiana if I became a SAG member.

As an extra, you need to figure

out what you want out of your film career. If you are happy with non-speaking background work, SAG membership may not be for you. If, on the other hand, you want to take it to the next level and work toward speaking roles on union films, then certain steps are in order, as stated by the Guild on the "Getting Started as an Actor" page of their Web site. Unless you live in a Screen Actors Guild "zone," which New Orleans is not, you could be ruling yourself out of work as an extra if you join. The best advice is to not worry about SAG membership until you're serious about becoming an actor with an agent to help you find speaking roles. Then, SAG is your sole source for information and support. ■

Gary Michael Smith is author of *Movie Extra 101—Your Shortcut to Stardom* and teaches a course at the University of New Orleans by the same name. He can be reached at [ChatgrisPress@ChatgrisPress.com](mailto:ChatgrisPress@ChatgrisPress.com).