

Interview with Steve Kaplan

Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

7-8 minutes

Steve Kaplan worked for years as a visual effects artist on feature films, TV shows, and commercials. He then joined The Animation Guild [[Local 839](#)] in 2010 to help organize the animation and visual effects fields. He has been instrumental in reaching out to members working in non-union studios as well as internally organizing members with the goal of education and awareness on important union matters.

In this excerpt, Kaplan discusses the challenges he confronts trying to convince artists of the value of organized labor.

The Value of Organized Labor

Do the conditions of visual effects in some way inhibit those artists [from organizing] more so than animators?

Overall, being a member of a union doesn't mean much to people today. I don't think it's because they don't understand the benefits. When you ask somebody what the benefit is of unionization they will show you their health card.

But nobody understands the power of the collective voice.

Nobody understands the intangible benefit of having those protections. It is unfortunate, but now in order to instill these you have to give a history lesson. And that makes you seem like a school marm, wrapping people on the knuckles trying to tell them, "Hey, this is good for you." So the biggest challenge to unionization in the animation world and doubly so in the visual effects world is that you have to answer "Why union?" And you have to do it in a way in which you are not berating or coming across like a used-car salesman.

So, you talk about the collective voice and the power to make change. But it is not like the union would have been able to stop [[Rhythm & Hues](#)] from dying. Rhythm died because John overextended himself in an industry that is asking people to overextend themselves. [Rough Draft](#) survives because Claudia is a shrewd businessperson.

The artists at Rough Draft may not understand that being a part of a union means being able to keep these tangible benefits as you float around the industry, because plenty of people come and go from Rough Draft. It's what we call a seamless cloak of benefits; that is, to be able to go from studio to studio and maintain the same health and pension plans. Simply having a pension plan, an actual "defined benefit" pension plan — you don't see those anymore today.

The animation industry is in fact mostly union, or at least the places that most artists aspire to go: [DreamWorks](#), Disney, Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon. But again, Rough Draft keeps a core staff of people and instills this culture of belonging within the studio and treats their people well. So because of that, you

don't see a union at Rough Draft. Organizing these non-union studios becomes difficult because people also feel an allegiance to the smaller non-union studios. Titmouse was very difficult to organize because Chris Prynosi is such a huge personality and he comes from Disney. He is a kid at heart and a big animated character himself. When you work for him you are like, "Yeah, I love Chris Prynosi, he is so cool. And he makes these great films, so why would you want to attack Chris like that?" That is the disconnect. People think if they band with their colleagues and form a union they're attacking the employer, and their city. Animation needs the union. Desperately. Wages are terrible, conditions are terrible. People just don't understand the value of unionization.

You are making an argument for the union as a fundamental package of benefits and protections. Workers need to understand unions are about creating entitlements across all work environments. Yet, you are talking to an industry that is very, very anxious about the fortunes of the companies for whom they work.

It becomes very, very difficult to un-muddy the line. I think there is an extreme distinction between the visual effects artist working at studios and the visual effects studios working for the producers. Scott Ross disagrees with me on this but I don't feel that the unionization of the visual effects shops means the death of the shop. Scott does because Scott worked for Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) and then Digital Domain (DD). He saw the bottom-line margin when he was at ILM and saw how much the health and pension contributions cost. Therefore, he says, that

burden would crush the shop. I counter that constantly by saying, "How can music videos, commercials, and low-budget features survive with union contracts? The goal and purpose of the union is to protect the member.

Sure, back in the late 1960s all the union had to offer the employer was the Hollywood basic agreement. You simply signed that. But then the entertainment paradigm started to change. It was no longer the same world it once was when the basic contract was written in the 1940s and 1950s. Unions needed to adjust the agreement. It is better to be doing covered work than non-covered work. So let's figure out a way to make it work.

So, in today's union world you have three tiers of budget that are considered before somebody signs the basic. And if those tiers aren't met, then you have production agreements. You have Movie of the Week agreements. You have music video, commercial agreements. All of these agreements now take different budget concerns into consideration. Is there a pension contribution at all? Are you a part of our Cadillac health plan or are you part of this other health plan that still offers health coverage but does it at a lower cost and therefore fits into these budgets better?

I think that model can easily translate into visual effects. If you take a look at how the IATSE National Benefits Funds are structured, it already is geared towards visual effects. It is geared for the "Day Player". It is geared for people who work outside the coasts and in the middle of the country where maybe costs are down but benefits are still needed. We can

easily bring that into the visual effects world and make it work. So I reject Scott's notion that an \$8 per hour, per employee contribution is going to kill the visual effects shop. I think Sony Imageworks can afford the Motion Picture Industry Pension and Health plan. Could Joe VFX, down the street? No. Joe VFX is battling with Imageworks, or is trying to get episodic work and doesn't want to move to Canada, and has a core team of six to ten guys and has figured out how to render through an Amazon service so he doesn't have to buy his own render farm. He is making it work and that \$8 an hour for each one of those employees is likely going to cut into his budget. That is where the flexibility of today's union comes in and yet very few people are aware of that aspect.