VFX Workers Protest Oscar Day for Second Year

By John Vanderhoef

For the second year in a row, more than 500 VFX workers and supporters gathered along Hollywood Boulevard on the day of the Academy Awards in an effort to call attention to the plight of VFX labor. While last year’s protest was more broadly focused on a range of concerns, this year’s protest centered on combating foreign subsidies that have drawn VFX work away from LA to other parts of the world.

The group ADAPT (Association of Digital Artists, Professionals, and Technicians) organized this year’s protest to directly address what they see as the problem of foreign subsidies. ADAPT characterizes foreign subsidies as “corporate welfare” for Hollywood studios, and suggests producers use subsidies to “game various governments against each other.” Ultimately, ADAPT suggests that jobs stay in areas like Vancouver only as long as government handouts do, and as soon as a city reduces its subsidy or another location offers a better one, producers follow.

ADAPT has been working with a law firm in Washington DC to
explore implementing a duty levied on imported VFX work, which would effectively negate the savings of international subsidies and help neutralize global competition. Ironically, the organization’s legal efforts have been bolstered by recently discovered MPAA advisory documents that argue “imported electronic transmissions” must qualify for certain protections under tariff law now that digital distribution is replacing the shipment of physical goods. ADAPT lawyers believe the logic will help them classify VFX work in a similar manner.

Although bothered by rain and completely ignored by the televised awards ceremony, including nary a mention by Best Achievement in Visual Effects winners who worked on Gravity, the protest still managed to generate some buzz, notably a mention by Conan O’Brien on his TBS late night program. The FX Podcast also recorded an episode of its show during the protest, offering an on-the-ground perspective that captures the frustration and energy of the crowd. Chief among the many attendees was Daniel Lay, known for his VFX Soldier blog. Lay co-founded ADAPT and led the protest organizing efforts.

Despite the rising status of VFX industry, the sector has been in turmoil for over a decade, a situation made palpable with massive layoffs and bankruptcy, most recently exemplified in the closing of Canada-based Modus.