



THE EQUITY DIFFERENCE

BY WALT DISNEY WORLD CAST MEMBER
AND ELECTED EQUITY COUNCILOR
LOGAN BENEDICT

We all work for Disney because we love Disney. Maybe not our managers, the hours, or the decisions being made in the current climate - but the Disney we all knew growing up. As guest facing cast members, we see firsthand the true value of "magic" in regards to the guest experience. Disney parks are "just another theme park" without the world class talent we provide for them.

Why do we need a union to work at Disney?

The current Equity contract at Walt Disney World is the best kept secret in the live entertainment industry. Many Equity performers who are used to traditional theatre contracts (paid weekly) would be surprised to learn that our weekly rate competitively compares to some of the best regional contracts in the country - and most of us work five days a week VS six days like most theatre contracts.

I can't speak for DLC employees, but a majority of my co-workers work at Disney as long as they can. Since many of us work 5, 10, 15 years and beyond, we build a healthy retirement pension for ourselves. We're seeing less pensions in America these days, and Equity has a very healthy pension fund that supports artists into their retirement years.

Negotiations (contracts, weekly labor relations meetings, and rehearsal observations)

It's no secret that Disney is a mega-corporation. Underneath the warm and fuzzy facade of Walt Disney Co., there's a machine that unfortunately turns many of us into numbers. Without constant attention from our business reps, Disney would be free to shift us around anyway they see fit. I've seen it firsthand at the bargaining table - if they could get five twelve-hour days out of us a week with little to no breaks, they would do it. Their top priority is guest satisfaction, so our comfort, mental and physical health tend to take a backseat when company goals are number one.

The Contract

The Walt Disney World contract is about 30 years old now. We've come a long way since the first contract and we've been lucky to have a few members on the negotiating team that have been there since the beginning. Since this is what we call a "mature" contract now, most of our main goals every negotiation cycle revolve around financials. In negotiations past, our more seasoned team members described spending *days* negotiating a second pair of clean socks to wear during an 8 hour shift in the Florida sun - Disney counts every single penny, so it's paramount to have a union that understands their tactics and who has the experience with one of the most challenging bargaining partners in entertainment.

Daily Ops

We all have that manager or leader who wants to win a gold star by making your jobs harder. Sometimes the conditions of our stage is unsafe for the day and we feel pressured to perform in dangerous conditions. With a union presence, we can have business reps on site, usually the same day, to inspect working conditions and enforce the contract if and when necessary.

Also, if you're in the middle of a disciplinary situation, it's beyond helpful to have a union representative present at any and all of your company discussions. When statements are being collected due to a work event, saying the wrong things or not saying enough could be the difference between an incident dismissal or a termination. Equity reps saved my job (and honestly my career) so I can't overstate the importance of their presence enough. (Feel free to ask me the story)

Rehearsal Observations

When Disney creates new entertainment experiences, our reps observe continuously to gauge a number of things. Is the working environment safe? Does anything need to be modified? Can everything rehearsed be performed consistently and safely on a daily basis? Is there some work in the show that should belong under equity jurisdiction?and THE MATRIX

A schedule "Matrix" is negotiated for every entertainment experience. For example, when I worked at Beauty and the Beast, to receive 8 hours of pay I had to work 5 shows. This means each show is worth 1.6 hours of pay. As a principal, I'm also guaranteed the full week's pay regardless of how many shows I do, so 3 days a week I'd work 2 or 3 shows and two days a week I'd work 5 shows. The company can only max out my matrix during emergency situations and with notice (without paying penalties) so again, it's always beyond helpful to have reps keeping an eye on the company when they're pushing the limits of our agreement.

The overall contract negotiations

Traditionally the main contract is negotiated every five years. If we don't love the contract we could request that the terms are less than five, but if terms are good, we tend to agree on 5 year agreements. These negotiations make the biggest impact on your daily work life balance, so being plugged in and involved during these cycles is highly recommended. We had added a 25% increase to the minimum salaries in year one alone in 2022 because the entire membership banded together and appealed to the company as a single unit. Disneyland's success will revolve around the same show of solidarity.

The negotiating team is made up of members and co-workers of your choosing. It will be chaired by a member of the National Council (most likely me or Bert Rodriguez) and will be overseen by local and senior staff. We also rely on action teams that interact with workers as much as possible to keep everyone plugged into the process. We caucus and survey members to create priorities and then create a list of proposals. At the table the company and the union both present their proposals, and a number of weeks are spent whittling down, refining, removing and agreeing on these items.

**As Disney employees, we know the company revolves around five “Keys”:
Safety, Efficiency, Courtesy, Show and Inclusion.**

Luckily, these are also Equity’s priorities, so we take every moment possible to point out what we share in common, and do our best to remain respectful bargaining partners.

The current relationship between Walt Disney World and Actors’ Equity is a positive one. While many difficult decisions were made during the pandemic, our membership came together for the 2022 negotiation, and worked respectfully but firmly with the Disney negotiating team. When the final agreement was made on the last day, both sides stood and applauded each other while sharing tears of joy in the hopes of a renewed commitment to live entertainment at Disney parks. Our new Orlando Equity office opened two weeks ago, and some of our Disney labor partners joined us to congratulate Equity on the new opening. To me, this was a sign of the amicable relationship between our two organizations. The ground work has already been done in Orlando. We’re confident this peaceful relationship can extend to Disneyland as well.

Other benefits of union membership:

Being part of a labor union joins your voice with millions of other workers fighting for better working conditions.

Your Equity membership makes it easier to join other performing arts unions.

You can work on Equity contract at other venues, both in California and around the country.

You get priority access to Equity auditions.

Add your voice to Equity’s political power advocating for worker power and arts funding on the state and federal level.

Equity-League Pension and 401 (k) retirement savings.

Union discounts.

Member-only events and workshops.

