



Noelle LuSane

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***“One day you’re likely going to have to call in the union,
and they’re going to have to fight on your behalf.”***

An actor and mother-to-be shares her perspective on union protection against wage theft
and unfair treatment at work

After earning a master’s degree in Education and Human Development, with a focus on International Education, from the George Washington University, Noelle LuSane pursued a career in foreign affairs on Capitol Hill. She served as an advisor and as staff director of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations. Her regional portfolio covered Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Middle East and a host of issues including conflict and post-conflict situations, human rights, global health, development, democracy and governance, State Department operations, and international organizations.

In 2010, LuSane left her accomplished foreign affairs career to pursue a lifelong dream of acting. Today, the actress has appeared in national and regional television commercials, theater, and independent film. Her work made her eligible to join SAG-AFTRA—a union that represents more than 160,000 film, television and radio performers, personalities and journalists around the world.

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I'm an actor. For as long as I can remember, this is what I always wanted to do. I've been acting for about four years. I did a couple of episodes on a soap opera that opened the door for me to join the union. So in 2012, I became an actor-member of SAG-AFTRA.

Unions weren't something that I'd given much thought to besides learning about them as part of history in school. And it's not something that really came up in my work on Capitol Hill. So prior to becoming a member, it's not something that I really knew much about or had given much thought to.

The benefits are actually great. Prior to becoming a member of the union, I booked a couple of local, regional commercials. And because these commercials were not governed by the union, the contracts were “buyouts”—meaning they could pay you whatever they agreed to, basically. Without a union behind you, you sort of agree to whatever amount they throw at you. I remember this one commercial: We had 12- to 13-hour days and one meal. It was grueling. And at the time, I accepted it as what you have to do.

In contrast, on union commercials that I shoot, there are scheduled breaks after a certain number of hours. You have to have breaks, meals; and if you work over eight hours, you get paid overtime. There are a lot of protections for actors through the union that I didn't have before I joined. I didn't even know that I would have been entitled to the protections. That's just one example.

I had a situation. There was a commercial that I shot. It wasn't a national commercial, which is easier to track. It was a regional commercial, and it was showing only in the South. I found out it was running a year after we had shot it, and I wasn't getting residual checks. I ended up getting residuals that I otherwise would not have seen—just because the union went through this process on my behalf. It took a long time, and it's not something I would have been able to do by myself. In fact, before I called the union, I actually called the production company and the ad agency and nobody returned my phone calls. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with it. But once the union got involved, they had no choice because they would face legal action; and they knew the process. So, something like that could happen.

Unfortunately, there is plenty of non-union work, which means, actors may not be getting compensated adequately for their work. They're working longer hours than they really should be, and they don't have protections for whether they get paid or not. There are a lot of things that can happen. But membership has its privileges, you know, like the American Express card slogan. It just pays to pay dues because one day you're likely going to have to call in the union, and they're going to have to fight on your behalf. So, I'd rather have that in my back pocket.

I'm pregnant, and recently I've been wondering whether I could bring my newborn child onto set if I had to? Because as a working mother in this business, you've got to take work when you can get it. I had an opportunity to be a series regular on a project that shoots in South Africa. My manager and I tried to figure out how I could do it. But because it shoots in South Africa and I'm due at that time, I couldn't do it. But it raises the question: "In that working environment, are any provisions made? Should there be any provisions made?" It's something I haven't looked into, and it makes me want to follow up with SAG-AFTRA and see.

What if you are a series regular who works on a show already and you become pregnant? What are your rights in terms of saying, "No I don't want to take off six months or three months?" Because it would be non-paid most likely, unless you can negotiate some great deal.

For women who need and want to work, and need and want to have a newborn and have some kind of day care, what options are there? I can imagine scenarios where women have to make the choice between having a child and staying with a job.

Obviously your agent would get involved, but I would think that SAG-AFTRA would also get involved. I haven't given it enough thought to think to look into it. But not being a union member, I wouldn't even have to wonder because I'd pretty much be at the behest of the production. Whatever they wanted to do, I could just be left behind.

So to other young women actors, I would say joining a union is worth it. It's an investment. It's sort of like having insurance. You're protected.