



February 18, 2021

Public Statement on former SAG-AFTRA Local Board Member John Mitchell

On January 25, 2021, a board member for SAG-AFTRA—Philadelphia local John Mitchell—posted a highly offensive meme depicting President Biden with an exaggerated bucktoothed grin, cartoonish slit eyes, and a Fu Manchu moustache against the backdrop of a People's Republic of China flag. The text read “Introducing Our 46th President, Sum Dum Fuk.”

Images like these resemble propaganda that has been historically used to incite hate against peoples of East Asian descent in the United States. These kinds of racist “jokes” have sadly been normalized in American popular culture for generations—and have had a tremendously negative impact on our communities.

Since Donald Trump began [referring to COVID-19 as “the China Virus” in early 2020](#), hate crimes against Asian Americans have steadily [increased throughout the world](#), with [over 2,000 anti-Asian hate crimes reported in the US](#) alone. In the last month there have been attacks on Asian American elders in San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, San Diego, and New York City. In our very own city, a pregnant Chinese woman was [attacked last summer](#). Racist tropes like those in Mitchell’s post are strong contributors to the surge of these violent hate crimes and to the current climate of xenophobic and anti-immigrant hate.

The images and portrayals we produce as American entertainers and cultural influencers have a profound impact on the ways that historically marginalized communities are perceived. Asians and Asian Americans are still largely underrepresented and misrepresented in popular media. Images like the meme that Mitchell posted illustrate how the use of racist depictions of Asian people, culture, and imagery as humor is still pervasive and entrenched in our society today.

SAG-AFTRA’s statement, which was released on February 10th, two weeks after the post in question was made public, states:

It is with much regret that we have recently been receiving complaints concerning a social media post found on a Philadelphia Local Board member's social media page. We do not condone any conduct that fosters discrimination and intolerance. As a board, we value diversity and inclusion and condemn any action contrary to these principles.

The initial non-apology was tepid, inadequate, and did not hold Mitchell accountable for his blatantly racist sentiments. In addition, there was no action taken by SAG-AFTRA until there was public outcry by Asian American leaders such as Nydia Han and Denise Nakano. This statement, posted to the SAG-AFTRA Philadelphia Facebook page on February 17 suggests that this incident of racism was a matter of free speech:

While SAG-AFTRA respects each individual's rights to free speech, members of the local board are held to a higher standard.

Since members of the SAG-AFTRA Philadelphia Local Board claim to hold themselves to a higher standard, we hope that they will seriously reflect on this incident and consider tangible actions that can be taken to prevent future incidents like this. Although John Mitchell has been removed, and Chinese American community member Lyman Chen has been appointed as the newest member of the board, this is only a first step. We are calling for the board to hold themselves accountable by hiring professionals to educate, train, and guide the organization in adopting anti-racist and decolonized practices and procedures. We are calling for the board to reexamine their vetting procedures to ensure that future board members will adequately uphold these values professionally and personally. SAG-AFTRA must use their platform to positively impact the discourse on equitable representation in the film and television industries.

Sincerely,



Rob Buscher
Board Chair



Selena Yip
Festival Director