

One month of the US film and television writers' strike

By David Walsh
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The strike by more than 10,000 US film and television writers has now entered its second month. The writers walked out November 5—after 90 percent of those voting authorized a strike on both coasts—in support of a number of demands, above all, decent compensation for the use of their material on the Internet and other new media.

The writers, supported by actors, producers, directors and others, have shown their determination to win their entirely legitimate demands. More than that, many have evinced enormous hostility toward their employers on the picket lines, at rallies and in interviews. Prominent figures in films and television have been only too eager to express their backing for the writers and their antagonism for the conglomerates.

Various factors are no doubt at work.

The writers specifically have seen a rotten agreement the Writers Guild (WGA) struck with the studios and networks in the 1980s on compensation for residuals (royalties) on the sale of DVDs cost them a vast sum. And it's not simply that this money didn't go into their pockets, but it helped enrich the multimillionaires and billionaires who own the entertainment conglomerates. These are largely hated figures, deservedly so.

Like everyone else in the US, the writers have witnessed the growth before their eyes of a vast social chasm between the elite in their industry and themselves, along with actors, directors, independent producers, crew and, of course, tens of thousands of lower-paid workers.

The Hollywood moguls have attempted, unsuccessfully to this point, to whip up public resentment against the “wealthy” and “highly paid” writers. According to the WGA, a typical member makes approximately \$62,000 a year if earnings are averaged over a five-year period—less than the amount required for a family of four to live decently in California, according to recent studies. What is this compared to the \$22.5 million in total compensation, for example, that Time Warner's Richard Parsons received in 2006?

Moreover, there is the matter of the writers' everyday encounters with studio and network executives, who often treat them as disposable and easily dispensed with parts.

The film or television writer's job is to translate his or her knowledge of the world into human situations, dramatic or comic, that bring out truths in a convincing and entertaining fashion. No matter how strenuously some

writers may attempt—at what cost to themselves and their art?—to adjust to the present structure of the film and television industry, in the end, their best instincts must rebel against its limitations.

The industry's obsession with the “bottom line,” the inevitable crassness and philistinism of the corporate chiefs, their cavalier disregard for truth and reality in favor of what's supposedly ‘marketable’ or acceptable to advertisers—how can this not produce revulsion?

The strike has set the writers and the giant firms directly against each another. There should be no illusion on this score. Despite the more soothing recent comments of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), the employers intend to teach the writers and everyone else in Hollywood a lesson. The writers' audacity in challenging Disney, Murdoch's News Corp., Time Warner, CBS, NBC Universal and the rest has outraged the studio and network executives. Global economic pressures are driving them, and they regard the writers in the same hostile light as they do auto workers in Detroit or textile workers in the Chinese province of Guangdong.

The strike and the ongoing negotiations cannot be regarded as ‘business as usual.’ The current conflict takes place under extraordinary conditions: an immense and growing financial crisis, the disastrous war in Iraq, widespread hatred of the Bush administration. As we have argued from the outset, the writers, by a twist of fate, are speaking for millions in the US who have seen their jobs, living standards and elementary rights sustain systematic attack for a quarter-century.

A great deal depends on the writers and others in the film and television world expanding their view of their industry and society as a whole. Many resent their treatment at the hands of the conglomerates. But this is not an isolated phenomenon, or a matter of the personalities of those who currently operate the studios and networks, swinish as they may be. The interests of the writers and the corporate chiefs are *objectively and irredeemably opposed*. In the end, if the massive companies were to prevail financially and culturally, that would mean the intellectual and economic ruin of the writers and other artists.

This raises political and historical questions that cannot be ignored. Hollywood has a bitter experience on this score. Left-wing ideas circulated widely in the film industry in the 1930s and 1940s. Many writers joined or supported the Communist Party, believing that it represented the traditions of the Russian Revolution and was a vehicle for the transformation of American society. This was a tragic error. The CP was a thoroughly Stalinized organization, which

opposed the political independence of the working class and advocated debased, anti-Marxist theories of “socialist realism.”

The blacklist and the McCarthyite witch-hunts, whose success was made possible in part by the crimes of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and the opportunist policies of the CPUSA, did immense damage to the American entertainment industry. Anti-capitalist views were essentially criminalized; genuinely critical and probing views in general were discouraged in film and television. The result was a serious cultural regression, from which we have not recovered to this day.

These issues arise in and around the writers’ strike because it is one expression of a growing resistance in the US and globally to the depredations of globally-organized capital. Every effort will be made to restrict this emerging radicalization in the US within the suffocating embrace of the Democratic Party. However, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards, no less than George W. Bush, are political representatives of the American ruling elite.

The Hollywood chiefs, the very individuals who would like to see the writers work for pennies, constitute one of the pillars of the Democratic Party. It is entirely appropriate that the AMPTP announced Wednesday that it has hired Mark Fabiani and Chris Lehane to assist in their public relations effort. The pair previously worked for the Clinton White House, the Al Gore campaign in 2000 and former Democratic Gov. Gray Davis of California. The connections could hardly be more intimate, and they expose the fraud of the statements of support for the writers made by Clinton, Obama and Edwards.

Following the insulting offer made by the Alliance last Thursday, which held out the prospect of a \$250 fee for a year’s reuse of an hour-long program streamed over the Internet, the WGA countered with its own proposal on Tuesday. The guild says its plan would cost the companies \$151 million over three years. As a concession, the union has dangerously and mistakenly dropped its demand to improve the formula by which writers are paid for DVDs.

The WGA has accepted the flat-fee framework for material reused over the Internet, proposing that writers receive \$632 for the first 100,000 views, with rates increasing with each 100,000 views after that.

The guild has rejected the claims by the AMPTP that its offer for a “New Economic Partnership” is worth \$130 million to the writers in increased revenue over three years. John Bowman of the WGA’s negotiating committee commented Tuesday: “Our analysis ... tells us their offer is worth only \$32 million. But if you factor in the companies’ regressive proposal on ‘promotional use’ (streaming TV

shows and feature films in their entirety for free) writers could potentially lose \$100 million in income over the course of this contract.”

In other words, the studios and networks are proposing to appreciably worsen the writers’ situation. The WGA in its most recent update points out that since 2000, “entertainment segment revenue for our employers has grown from \$63 billion to \$95 billion. That’s a robust 51 percent increase. ... WGA members have actually fallen behind. While entertainment segment revenue has grown at an annual rate of 7 percent over the last 7 years, writers’ earnings and residuals have grown only 3.5 percent.”

But how did Bowman continue in his comment Tuesday? “So while we don’t see how their proposal adds up to anywhere near \$130 million, we greet their public willingness to make such an offer with real interest. If the AMPTP is serious about this figure, the WGA is confident we are closer to a deal than anyone has suggested, and we are hopeful that the companies will respond positively to our proposal, which is a serious, reasonable, and affordable attempt to bridge the gap between us.”

This is entirely unserious. The companies are not interested in a reasonable and equitable settlement of the conflict; they want to defeat and drive back the writers, by cunning and guile at the negotiating table, if possible—by any other means, if necessary.

This is Hollywood. Gossip, speculation and every variety of subjectivism known to humankind swirl around these negotiations. It is impossible to predict the immediate outcome of this week’s talks.

We encourage writers and their supporters not to become distracted by this or that rumor and face fundamental realities. They are engaged in an enormously serious struggle. Perseverance is an excellent quality, but mere perseverance is insufficient. The pursuit of the writers’ immediate demands and long-term interests requires a new strategy, one based on a socialist critique of the existing political and economic set-up.

Walking picket lines in the hope that the huge corporations will eventually see the light, economically or morally, is, in our view, an illusion. The strike needs to spread and encompass, first of all, actors, directors, Teamsters, IATSE members and others. It is a universal issue in the entertainment industry.

Beyond that, the writers will not attain their ends apart from challenging the conglomerates’ stranglehold over entertainment and information in the US. The writers need to reject the Democrats, their utterly false ‘friends,’ and turn to the broad layers of the population itching for a fight with the corporate and financial elite.