

Writers strike: studios and networks dig in their heels

By D. Lencho
8 December 2007

Closed-door negotiations between the Writers Guild (WGA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) have failed to produce an agreement during the fifth week of the strike by more than 10,000 US film and television writers. Despite the union having ceded ground on the issue of DVD residuals, the AMPTP continues to push its recent concessions proposal—the “New Economic Partnership.”

There is speculation in the entertainment press that the studio and network heads will remain intransigent. Variety’s Dave McNary writes: “Sources warn that the lack of other substantive movement from both sides could signal that the CEOs will decide soon that they’ve gone as far as they can go and put a take-it-or-leave-it package on the table. The problem for the WGA leaders is that such a package may be unacceptable—in that it will be impossible to sell to a membership that’s had its expectations elevated after having been on strike for well over a month.”

The AMPTP recently contracted the services of Democratic Party-associated public relations consultants Mark Fabiani and Chris Lehane as well as those of Steve Schmidt, once advisor to California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the alliance is embarking on a more aggressive PR campaign after polls conducted by Pepperdine University, Fox News and Survey USA reported widespread public support for the writers.

On Thursday, a WSWs reporting team interviewed strikers picketing Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank, California.

Terrence Coli, a strike captain, is one of several writers that worked on the television show “One Tree Hill” on the CW network.

When asked about the latest developments in the negotiations, he replied, “I know they [AMPTP] made a big economic proposal last week and then we responded to it on Tuesday. We’re still waiting to hear what their response to our response is.”

Asked how he thinks the writers will win their demands given the ferocity of the AMPTP, he said, “I really feel that the show of support we’re putting together out here with all of the members is having an effect, because they know that the rank-and-file members of this union are really serious about the issues that are on the table. And they’re passionate about it and united.

“I think that getting the word out to the country—to the

world, really—is just as important and we’re trying to do that. The public perception of what we’re doing out here is very important and I can tell—they’ve done some polls—that people are on our side. That’s important and it keeps us energized.”

Support is important. Indeed, one of the challenges of conducting interviews on the picket line is to hear what is being said above the honking and shouting of supporters driving by. It is, however, not sufficient. The hiring of publicists notwithstanding, the studio moguls are not primarily swayed by public opinion. They are entirely focused on the “bottom line.”

Terrence’s mention of the worldwide nature of the efforts to get out the writers’ side of the story sparked another query from this reporter. Had he heard about the recent solidarity actions—marches, rallies, open letters—by writers in eight different countries? Though he hadn’t, he said, “That’s exciting.”

Discussion moved to expanding the writers’ fight not only to other entertainment unions, but to the working class as a whole. After mentioning the support that the writers have gotten from the Teamsters, Terrence said, “If this goes for a while, I think you’re going to see more of that, reaching out to the community at large. I think that at this point everybody’s hoping for a quick resolution, but certainly if this drags on—and it could...”

Maria Pearce is a WGA member with writer credits on several TV shows. She modestly refers to herself as “an aspiring writer.”

When asked whether she had heard about writers in other countries speaking out and marching in support of the writers, she responded, “I read a little bit on the Writers Guild web site, but I think it’s very significant because the Internet is affecting the whole world, not just the United States. It’s a mass market, making a lot of money, and I think people should be compensated.”

On the issue of the union backing down on DVD residuals, she said, “I don’t know that I feel negatively about it, because I think DVDs might go by the wayside with the Internet. With streaming, you can buy everything on iTunes. I don’t know that DVD sales are going to be as significant in the next 10 years or so. You can download everything.”

In terms of what it will take to win, Maria believes that “what’s happening now is negotiations where people actually listen to each other, and that’s what we’re hearing and hopefully that’s actually what’s going on. I think that’s the important thing. It’s a negotiation, and you need to talk to negotiate.”

When the WSWs asked her about shutting down the

industry by extending the strike, Maria replied, “I don’t know. I know that there are a lot of people in the world that are struggling and don’t get treated fairly by their employers and that’s a worldwide problem. I don’t know how you’d be able to do that [shut it down] in this particular industry because there’s so much money involved to begin with. Because there’s so much money and so many important people in it now... I guess it’s possible, but I can’t see how to do it.”

Asked what she thought of the entertainment conglomerates being run as public companies, Maria said that “as an aspiring writer, I think it’s a good idea. I mean, I think, honestly, as long as you have a smart head for business, it’s not just about the creative, it is a business and it is about making money, so you have to have a balance of both, of the creative and the business-minded people.”

Asked, “Do you think the writers and the actors could run this industry?” Maria answered, “I think so. There are people that I know that are smart enough to do that.”

In New York City, striking writers and their supporters mounted picket lines this week at ABC on Tuesday, outside the locations of the network’s shows, “The View” and “All My Children,” and on Thursday at the Viacom headquarters in Times Square.

Neal Marshall Stevens, a feature motion picture writer

for 20 years, who wrote the film *Ghosts*, told the WSWS:

“What the companies put on the table gave us no choice but to strike. When they give us a fair deal then we will go back to work. The companies are playing hardball, which has been their strategy from the start. For both sides, the issue revolves around the Internet and the new media. Within 20 years, traditional TV and DVDs will be a thing of the past. Everything will be delivered online. If we do not get a fair share now, we will have no future. Indeed, we and all the creative workers have been losing ground for a long time. Throughout this country, all of labor has been suffering. We need some victories.”

Bill Phillips, an actor for 20 years and a member of SAG, AFTRA, and Actors Equity, joined the picket line outside ABC.

“I am an actor and we have to stick together,” he said. “The actors have a contract coming up soon. I am a member of the working class—my mother was in the postal workers’ union. We all have to speak with one voice in order to fight management, which is united with one voice against us. They are taking a very hard line because they come from a very powerful position.

“We have to be equally as strong. The writers are not asking for much—just for what is fair. For both actors and writers, it’s seasonal work. We get paid when we work, and don’t get paid when we don’t work.”