

Film and television writers confront big political and cultural issues

By David Walsh and Marc Wells
21 December 2007

The strike by film and television writers in the US is now in its seventh week. There have been no negotiations since the large studios and networks, represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), walked out of talks December 7, after arrogantly insisting that the Writers Guild (WGA) remove key demands before it would continue discussions. No negotiations are scheduled at this point.

Picketing is not taking place over the holidays—it will resume January 7. There is no let-up, however, in the immense pressure being exerted by the massive conglomerates on the striking writers, their families and supporters.

This reality was underscored Monday by NBC's announcement that "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" would return to the air, without writers, on January 2. A day earlier ABC reported that "Jimmy Kimmel Live," another late-night talk show, would resume production the same day. Talk shows were among the first victims of the writers' strike; reruns have replaced new shows since the first day of the walkout November 5.

Kimmel, Leno, O'Brien, Jon Stewart of "The Daily Show," Stephen Colbert of "The Colbert Report" and David Letterman of CBS's "Late Show," all of whom have been supportive of the strikers, have been paying staff out of their own funds. The New York Times reported December 6 that the various hosts were paying from \$150,000 to as much as \$250,000 a week each, depending on the size of the respective workforces.

Letterman, whose company Worldwide Pants owns his program and "The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson," is trying to work out an interim agreement with the Writers Guild.

Not only were the talk show hosts facing the burden of paying out large sums every week, they faced immense pressure from their employers. The Christian Science Monitor noted December 20 that the hosts were "in a tough position, say many industry insiders. According to one who asked not to be named, the network [NBC] exerted extraordinary pressure on Messrs. Leno and O'Brien, even hinting that their seats could be filled by others if they did not return to work."

In a statement released this week, explaining his decision to resume his nightly program, O'Brien noted: "My career in television started as a WGA member and my subsequent career as a performer has only been possible because of the creativity and integrity of my writing staff. Since the strike began, I have stayed off the air in support of the striking writers. I will make clear, on the program, my support for the writers and I'll do the best version of Late Night I can under the circumstances."

Leno, also a WGA member, made similar comments. Kimmel explained in a statement that he had "agonized" over the decision to return to work. He invoked the needs of his nonwriting staff. "Though it makes me sick to do so without my writers, there are more than a hundred people whose financial well-being depends on our show," he said. "It is time to go back to work. I support my colleagues and friends in the WGA completely and hope this ends both fairly and soon."

The writers and their supporters face massive transnational conglomerates who also own the media and have intimate connections to both major political parties. These ruthless firms are determined to impose their will and shape the future of the entertainment industry according to their selfish economic and ideological interests.

The top echelons of these half a dozen companies—General Electric (NBC), Time Warner (Warner Bros.), Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. (Fox), CBS (owned by billionaire Sumner Redstone's National Amusements), Disney and Sony—are thoroughly parasitical entities,

which add nothing to cultural life, but only detract from and threaten it. Their decisions as to what the population will be allowed to see and hear on a daily basis have nothing to do with concerns for truth or even genuine entertainment, but with what will add immediately and directly to the personal wealth of leading executives.

The Writers Guild leadership persists in calling on the AMPTP to be fair and reasonable, but the organization of the American entertainment industry itself is entirely unreasonable and irrational.

The WGA points out that its demands would only cost the industry \$150 million over three years. Murdoch and his right-hand man, president and chief operating officer of News Corp., Peter Chernin, received \$66 million in compensation in the 2007 fiscal year alone—at that rate, they would receive \$198 million over three years, or nearly \$50 million more than the total increase demanded (and rejected out of hand by the employers, including Murdoch) on behalf of more than 10,000 film and television writers.

These are not mere numbers. These are social realities. America is a deeply divided class society, whose divisions grow deeper each succeeding year. The media conglomerates intend to defeat the writers, drive them back and set an example for the actors and everyone else.

The writers' strike is seen by the companies as a challenge to their absolute dominion over films and television programming. More than profits are involved, as massive as the latter may be. Also at stake is the cultural life of the society, including its self-image. The entertainment giants are dead set against material appearing before mass audiences that would pierce the mythology about "democratic" America and portray the reality of oligarchic rule, i.e., expose their own social role and position. They want an intimidated and atomized group of writers, who will do what they are told.

A strike by writers in this field, that is, those charged with the responsibility of making sense of social life to a mass audience, inevitably raises these big questions. The conglomerate executives understand this quite well. They are highly sensitive to the explosive cultural and political issues. This is why they have begun a new round of radical-baiting, a time honored tactic in Hollywood.

Following its decision to break off talks December 7, the AMPTP condemned the WGA leadership's "Quixotic pursuit of radical demands [that] led them to begin this strike, and now has caused this breakdown in negotiations." Unable to restrain themselves, the studio and networks chiefs added later in the same short statement, "It is now absolutely clear that the WGA's organizers are determined to advance their own political ideologies and personal agendas at the expense of working writers and every other working person who depends on our industry for their livelihoods."

Two days later, a studio executive told *Variety*, speaking of the guild leaders, "For them, this is not a writers strike. It's about changing society. ... We are so frustrated. We're dealing with people who don't care about this community. They care about making social change in America."

In regard to the WGA leadership, which is respectable and well-heeled and which continues to pledge its commitment to the best interests of 'the industry as a whole,' including of course the profits of the giant firms, this is a fantasy. However, the entertainment moguls are not wrong in seeing the strike as objectively posing questions about the structure of their industry and American society as a whole.

Both decent living standards for writers and everyone else in the entertainment industry and an artistically and intellectually satisfying popular culture are incompatible with the current corporate stranglehold. How can the writers advance their cause without challenging the present

set-up and contributing to the emergence of a mass anti-capitalist social movement in the US?

Writers rally at AMPTP headquarters

On December 18 writers and supporters rallied outside the headquarters of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers in Encino, California. A WSWS reporter spoke to several writers about the conflict and some of its larger issues.

We asked writer-producer Marlene Meyer (“Law & Order: Criminal Intent,” “CSI”) whether she anticipated that talks between the writers and their employers would begin again soon.

Meyer replied, “They’ll resume and the AMPTP will do this dirty tricks business, and I don’t know how many times they’ll do it. It’s basically a ploy. It’s a ploy to get the writers to break down and capitulate. And it’s sad and it’s stinky. It’s such a bad thing to do.”

She spoke about the situation facing the average writer: “What’s amazing is that a lot of people out here don’t work that often and do depend on residuals. They’re not necessarily on shows regularly. A lot of them perhaps get one episode a year so they need that residual money, and they have families and they work in entertainment and they deserve it.”

The WSWS reporter asked Meyer what she thought of the recent hiring of the consulting firm of Mark Fabiani and Chris Lehane by the AMPTP. “Right,” she said, “they’re spin doctors.” We pointed out their very close ties to the Democratic Party.

Meyer commented, “There’s very little difference nowadays between the Democratic and Republican parties. They’re in a symbiotic relationship.” Wasn’t there then the need for an alternative for workers like her and everyone else involved in this strike?

“Well, we’re not exactly grape pickers. That’s not us. We are middle class writers. We make a decent living when we can work. It’s more than decent, it’s quite good.” But the studios and networks are raking in a vast fortune. Wasn’t the current conflict one instance of an effort by the ruling elite to proletarianize the middle class, to push it down? “No,” said Meyer, “I just think it’s a way of keeping money. It’s all about greed. I don’t think that America exactly has a political consciousness. Because if it did, why would it have elected George Bush?”

Meyer spoke about the threat to democratic rights under the Bush administration. “We’re becoming a fascist state. That’s how it starts. First you make everybody afraid. Then you start cutting back on their rights.

“Everyone in America has to wake up first of all and realize that a very big thing has happened, and it has been happening since George Bush took office and possibly even before that. Slowly, but surely, rights guaranteed by our Constitution are being eroded. The people who are charged with taking care of the Constitution are actually turning it on its head.

“We, in America, no longer have the protection of our own civil liberties. We’ve had them for hundreds of years and now, all of a sudden, we don’t have them. People in US prisons in foreign countries don’t have them. Our soldiers fighting in Iraq don’t have them, or any place else for that matter.

“We don’t have those guarantees any more. We’re not safe any more, and a bunch of terrorists might blow up another World Trade Center again. It’s a much different thing that’s happening today as it’s coming from our own government, and that’s what’s so scary. And this strike reveals only one aspect of it. It’s a symbolic action. This action undertaken by all these people today is important, but it is only very tiny piece of what needs to be done.”

The WSWS raised the issue of the writer’s freedom to express him- or herself under conditions in which a few conglomerates controlled

programming.

Meyer observed, “It’s not just the six or seven conglomerates, it’s the dozens of showrunners you work under who have to work for that conglomerate. Those people shape the way things go. For example, when ‘The West Wing’ was on, it had some controversial subjects. And I think that’s the reason that Aaron Sorkin pulled that show. Because people were trying to dictate the measure of the show in terms of what topics could be included and the show wanted a fairer version of reality, and the producers, on the other hand, wanted a toned-down, right-wing version of life in this country.

“And who knows what life in this country really is like. The Democrats don’t know, the Republicans don’t know. I’m not even sure even if you and I know.”

We spoke to actor Gary Watts, present at the rally to show his support for the striking writers.

Watts explained his views: “The AMPTP want something for nothing out of the backbone of the American working class and it’s just not going to happen any longer. I mean it’s time that we take back America, it’s time that we have a middle class, preserve what’s left of the middle class and it’s time that the writers, the Screen Actors Guild and everyone else get their fair share. We’re only asking for what’s fair.

“We look at this entertainment industry, it’s made up of multibillion-dollar corporations in a multibillion-dollar industry. You see the box office results, but we have to remember that most of those results printed in newspapers are only domestic; they’re not even talking about foreign moneys that are made out of this. So we’re looking at something on a scale that is unprecedented and if we don’t put a stop to it now, then America and the working class is in serious, serious trouble.

“As we speak right now on this line December 18, the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] is holding a hearing about more media consolidation. That would be just devastating to the American people as a whole—not just America, but globally it would have an impact on the dissemination of information. So there are some serious issues at hand here.

“I’m very disappointed with the Democratic Party at this point in time because they have shown very few differences with the Republican Party when it comes to standing up and fighting for the American working class. We’re going to have to have a viable third party in this country. The Democrats and the Republicans have got to this situation. ‘So what are you going to do, vote for a Republican?’ That’s what the Democrats will say. The Republicans will say, ‘What are you going to do, vote for a Democrat?’ If it’s only the lesser of two evils, why vote for anybody at all? It’s time for us to have a viable independent third party not beholden to anybody but the American people.

“Even though we live in a capitalist society, what you really see during time of need is that the American people come together and act in a socialist manner, such as taking care of their neighbors, taking care of their friends, helping everybody out. I think basically the socialism that I’m looking at is part of the fabric of American society—or used to be anyway—it used to be the ‘we’ instead of the ‘me.’ And I believe that’s the social conscience that the old America used to have.

“I mean, ‘by the people, for the people,’ going back to the essence of what America was founded on, going back to the essence of the Constitution of the United States. I think America as a whole—in the political arena especially—has wandered away from the true intent of the forming of this country. We have to go back to the basics. We the people need to go back to that kind of essence.

“Both parties will come together on issues that affect them. Democrats and Republicans will do anything that they possibly can to ensure that there is no independent party or any independent opposition, anything that threatens the two-party system. They will join together to ensure that that doesn’t happen.”