

Sixty-nine percent of those polled in Los Angeles support walkout Writers strike enters second week

By Ramon Valle
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As the strike by 12,000 television and film writers on both coasts enters its second week, neither the Writers Guild of America (WGA) nor the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers has made any announcement during the past two days concerning future negotiations. Talks broke off last Sunday, on the eve of the walk-out, and have not resumed since then.

Writers on both coasts began their strike against the conglomerates that run the entertainment business over the issues of DVD residuals and, most importantly, pay for the digital transmission of shows over the Internet, from which the writers get nothing. The studios are refusing to name any rate at which they would pay for such efforts.

The writers and their supporters among actors, directors, producers and others have shown considerable unity and sense of purpose. Perhaps more than anything, their struggle gives expression to the anger that millions of ordinary Americans feel toward the giant conglomerates that run so many of their lives and the vast gap growing wider every day between them and the super rich.

A poll taken a few days ago by *SurveyUSA News* provides some indication of the widespread support the writers are receiving in the general population. The survey found that 69 percent of adults in the Los Angeles metropolitan area familiar with the strike support the writers, while *only 8 percent* take the studios' side. Twenty-two percent said they had no opinion on the struggle.

The poll also found that support for the writers was strong across all demographic groups. Seventy-four percent of Hispanics, 79 percent of Blacks and 65 percent of whites support the strike, and among those who aver a familiarity with the issues involved, 75 percent responded they were in favor of the writers. In what must be a surprise to everyone, including the writers, 61 percent of Republicans in the Los Angeles support the strike.

During the first week of the strike, if the sound of car and truck horns meant anything, WSWS reporters could attest to the wide backing the writers enjoy.

In the weeks preceding the strike and during its first days, the media regularly claimed that the studios and the network could withstand a lengthy strike because they had stockpiled shows months in advance and that the walk-out would not

begin to affect production for several months.

In fact, quite a few shows have shut down completely. Among these are "Desperate Housewives" (ABC), "Two and Half Men", "Big Bang Theory" and "Rules of Engagement"—all on CBS. Fox has shut down "Til Death" and "Back to You".

NBC will shut down "The Office" and "30 Rock" this week; the stars of the former, including Steve Carrell, have refused to cross the picket lines.

The spring run of Fox's "24" has been delayed, which may cause a ratings disaster for the program.

Apparently, show runners—who combine the duties of writer and producer and organize the day-to-day operations of television shows—have stopped their editing of shows already filmed. They have done this on their own, apart from any instruction from the WGA. CBS, 20th Century Fox, and NBC Universal have threatened them with court action if they do not return to work, but the show runners have withstood the pressure so far and refused to go back to work.

Underscoring the social chasm between the studio chiefs and the writers (and nearly everyone else in the industry), Time Warner, one of the giant entertainment conglomerates locking horns with the writers, announced two days ago that Jeff Bewkes had been hired as its incoming CEO. (While the announcement made big headlines in many business and news web sites, it received scant attention in the *LA Times*, which buried the story in eight short paragraphs at the bottom of page C3 of its Business section.)

Most writers live from paycheck to paycheck, or residual check to residual check. Mr. Bewkes is not likely to have any such problem. He will receive over the next five years an annual base pay of \$1.75 million, plus, according to the *LA Times*, "an annual target bonus of \$8.5 million"; and an incentive pay of "as much as \$8.5 million in stock options."

In addition, the new contract allows Bewkes to resign "if the Board does not name him chairman by January 1, 2009." (*LA Times*) And if he's fired during the term of the contract for any reason other than malfeasance, he will receive two years' "severance pay and a bonus" of a so far undetermined nature or amount.

According to *Forbes*, the details don't stop there. "He can be paid an annual discretionary bonus ... with a target of

\$8.5 million; he also can receive long-term incentive compensation with an identical target value. The potential bonus total: \$17 million annually.”

The *Wall Street Journal* observes, “Investors are hoping that Mr. Bewkes will take a more aggressive approach to reshaping Time Warner in an effort to boost the company’s share price, which has stagnated of late. Investors are anxious for pieces of the company to be split off or sold.”

And just how does he intend to boost the price of the company’s stock? Bewkes’s answer was short: by “becoming the most profitable company with the highest returns.” Bewkes added that he would “have to look harshly and restructure costs.” In other words, Time Warner’s employees (including those who work for Warner Bros. Studios) have been put on notice.

Meanwhile, an unusually candid piece in the Associated Press (AP), “Glamor Belongs to Only Part of Hollywood” by Sandy Cohen, noted: “The average salary for entertainment industry employees is \$73,000 a year, a handsome income that’s 80 percent higher than the national average, according to a 2006 study by the Motion Picture Association of America.

“Yet most workers in Hollywood earn far less—when they even have jobs—because the MPAA’s average includes multimillion dollar salaries paid to executives.”

The AP piece cited the example of Hollywood makeup artist Bruce Grayson, with nearly 20 years in the business: “He lives in a condo, not a mansion. He has one car, not a

fleet. And he wears some designer duds, ‘but the articles are few and far between.’ After two decades in the business, Grayson said he’s still ‘amazed’ by the level of wealth and luxury the industry provides to the stars who put a face on Hollywood for the rest of the planet. ‘It’s not my world,’ he said. ‘It’s their world.’”

Writers should be under no illusion that the conglomerates, including Time Warner, will ever bargain in good faith. That the companies solemnly declare they cannot afford to pay the writers a few pennies per DVD and then in the midst of a bitter strike announce the sort of deal worked out with Bewkes is itself a provocation. In another epoch the studios would either have delayed the CEO’s contract signing or kept it hush-hush.

Today there is only a concern to reassure the big shareholders, whose pockets are bottomless. The studios have only contempt for the writers, actors, directors and anyone else in Hollywood who considers him or herself an artist. And, long ago having taken the measure of the union leaderships in Hollywood, they treat the latter with particular scorn.

The greatest danger to the strike lies in the acceptance of the WGA and the other union bureaucracies of a social framework in which the corporations hold absolute sway. They subordinate the interests of their members to their alliance with the Democratic Party, which represents the interests of the same companies the writers are battling.