

WSWS speaks to striking writers

By Dan Conway, D. Lencho and Kevin Mitchell
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Over the weekend, the media reported that the Writers' Guild of America (WGA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) tentatively outlined a deal meant to put an end to the three-month-old writers' strike.

Last week, the WSWS spoke to striking writers on the picket lines at studios in the Los Angeles area. The conversations took place prior to the news of the tentative deal between the guild and the studios and networks. We talked with writers about the Directors Guild (DGA) contract, the increasingly conciliatory attitude of the WGA leadership toward the AMPTP, and the general political situation in the United States.

Many strikers were critical of the DGA contract because of the give-backs it contains on residual rates for online streaming of television and film. However, many also remained hopeful that the WGA would work out something better.

On January 31 the WSWS spoke with Irene Turner, a television and film writer, outside Paramount Studios in Los Angeles.

WSWS: What is your opinion of the DGA deal and what implications do you think it has for the WGA's negotiations?

Irene Turner: In some ways, I think it's a breakthrough, because, frankly, thanks to our toughness, we got them to bend on some things that we thought they would never give in on, such as some of the streaming and jurisdictional issues. With that said, the streaming rate is ...

WSWS: It's pretty abysmal.

IT: Yeah, it's pretty awful. I wish that we could do better. But what people forget is that the DGA deal was offered to the DGA, so who knows what we, the writers, will be able to negotiate or what we'll be offered. It's also a better deal for screenwriters than it is for television writers in general.

WSWS: Could you elaborate on that?

IT: Well, we don't have crystal balls to see in the future, but the kind of TV that doesn't get rerun such as the serial shows, *Lost* and *Heroes*, for example, whose second run will be on the Internet. In that sense, going from a residual payment to a streaming payment will be a big jump downward. On the other hand, the most efficient model for non-serialized and procedurals—shows that repeat well due to the fact that a viewer can drop in and watch, without having to follow a whole complex storyline—will be reruns. Those repeat very well and writers will still get that reuse

payment.

WSWS: The writers strike is occurring in the midst of a major recession in the US and internationally, with thousands of workers losing their jobs and oftentimes their homes. Film and television are very powerful artistic media, even though writers are more often than not limited in how they can make use of it. What is the role of a writer or what should be the role of a writer in this context?

IT: It's really complex. On the one hand, I firmly believe that if you write with your political viewpoint first, as opposed to your emotional point of view, you can sometimes end up being dry and polemical.

At the same time, you need to write what's important to you. As a person, I like to write about things that reflect my world view. I'm currently writing a novel for example, that's set in South America involving a large landless movement there. The land in South America is concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy people and people are fighting simply to live on subsistence farms. And the issue is how much can you do for someone in another country and when is it time to get committed about things?

So, I do write things that are political and at the same I do feel that in order to create something that works as a piece of art, you have to concentrate on the art first. But inevitably, what you write reflects who you are.

WSWS: Well, politics, art, emotion; these aren't mutually exclusive things.

IT: I agree. But if you try too hard to make a statement it becomes dry. You have to create characters who believe in something or are challenging something or even those who don't believe in anything. And then, you need to figure out why they care or why they don't.

I, myself, tend to put things in a bigger context and I know that the word we've been getting on a national level is that a lot of labor leaders are excited about this strike, because it's the first time in a long time that the strikers are looked at as the good guys. Because, in a way, everybody's fighting the conglomerates. Everybody's feeling like this large octopus is coming after them, so it's casting us as the underdogs and people are behind us because of that.

The same day, the WSWS also spoke to Jim Reagle at Paramount.

WSWS: What do you think it means to have huge multinational corporations deciding what the public can and cannot see, and what sort of impact does that have on the writers?

Jim Reagle: It just means that this is rogue capitalism

running amok, just as it does in every other sector of the economy. But I'm not speaking in socialist terms for your benefit, and I'm not a socialist either. It's just rogue capitalism and I'm against it.

WSWS: What do you think of the Democrats?

JR: The Democratic Party makes noises about being pro-labor. John Edwards made the only sense to me as being pro-labor, although Barack Obama is pretty good. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, is simply a Republican in Democrat's clothing.

The Democrats are in bed with the conglomerates too. I have no illusions about the Democrats. Honestly, at this point, I don't know who I'm going to vote for. I'll probably abstain.

On January 31, a team of WSWS reporters also went to NBC Studios in Burbank and spoke with Anna Sandor.

Anna Sandor: There's always a power struggle between the artist and the money man and I'm sure—for them—in the best of all possible worlds, they'd like to control everything and they'd like to not pay residuals.

I've been out here every single day but one day for close to three months. And one of the reasons that I believe in my union is that when I get a residual payment and whether it's for \$100 or \$5,000, the reason I get those checks is because of the people behind me doing what they're doing, and if we don't do this, the writers 10 years down the line are going to be saying "What did you do?"

There's so much lobbying and so much big money in the major parties, I understand that they're just not going to line up blindly behind the union and take the union's side.

WSWS: The control of the entertainment industry by studios attached to giant conglomerates affects writers and their art, what they write, what they feel they can write.

AS: With so many independent filmmakers today, it's now even hard to tell the difference between the independents and the studios, it's all sort of blending together. So it's getting harder and harder, but I don't know what the solution is.

The WSWS finished the week by speaking with several striking writers outside of NBC Burbank on Friday, February 1. Michael gave us his assessment of the AMPTP's conduct in the negotiations.

Michael: The AMPTP—they've been kind of jerks. Most people don't think that they've been really sincerely doing negotiations because there were a few times when they made an offer, such as they said "If you take DVDs off the table we'll negotiate, we'll present a package with new media." And then the WGA did take it off the table and the AMPTP didn't present anything. And then, right before the strike started, the AMPTP falsely claimed that the WGA walked out of negotiating, saying "we can't deal with them."

That was not fair. I think what they wanted to do was to make the writers—this is not my theory, it's a prevailing theory—they wanted to make the writers look bad and childish and then negotiate something with the directors to save face. They also wanted to prolong it to make the writers hurt a little bit.

It used to be when there were moguls running the town, that there was a certain amount of guilt involved. They lived in the same town. They knew a lot of the people and it's not as much that way. Now it's a board of directors and it's people who are just number-crunchers that say, "Hey, you know, we can go this long, let's let the writers sweat it out."

I don't think it's as conducive to good entertainment really. I mean it used to be that Louis B. Mayer got involved and wanted to make good movies and I don't think that the case with GE. They're just looking at the bottom line and that's it, which is not a good way to make art.

Who's that CEO? He ran this company into the ground, and it was a media company too, and took away \$30 million. Like a golden parachute. And it happens all the time.

When you screw your job up and you're just a regular working guy, they fire you and they don't give you your next three years' pay. For some reason, these CEOs consider themselves a whole different caste of people.