

Why the writers' strike never came up in the Democrats' Los Angeles debate

By David Walsh
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In the course of their debate Thursday evening in Los Angeles, senators Hillary Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois, rivals for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, made a number of vague references to the conditions of the working population. Clinton spoke of "an economy that is not working for the vast majority of Americans, but well for the wealthy and the well-connected" and Obama took note of "the plight of working families all across the country."

One group of workers, however, received no mention in the debate: the more than 10,000 film and television writers, on strike for nearly three months.

The majority of the writers reside and earn a living, or attempt to, in the Los Angeles area. The Kodak Theatre, the site of the Democratic debate, will later this month host the Academy Awards ceremony, an event that may not glitter in its ordinary fashion if the writers strike continues and actors respect the picket lines, as expected.

Seated in the audience Thursday were some major figures in and around Hollywood, among them director/producer Steven Spielberg; actors Diane Keaton, Pierce Brosnan, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jason Alexander and Lou Gossett Jr.; director Quentin Tarantino; actor/director and Democratic Party activist Rob Reiner; television personalities Garry Shandling and Topher Grace; singer Brandy; producer James L. Brooks; former Paramount chief Sherry Lansing and Sony Pictures chief Amy Pascal.

The film industry came up one time in the debate, but only for the purpose of encouraging social backwardness in the viewing audience. Doyle McManus, Washington bureau chief of the *Los Angeles Times*, raised the issue, addressing Obama: "We're in Los Angeles, the entertainment capital of the world. The audience here in the Kodak Theatre includes many of the nation's most influential directors, producers and actors. Now, for many years, parents have worried that there's just too much sex and violence coming out of Hollywood. Do you agree with that? And if you do, what will you do about it if you're elected president?"

Obama took the opportunity to posture as an opponent of censorship and yet a proponent of family values.

The failure of both the questioners and the debaters to mention the film and television writers strike even once is no mystery. All those involved in the event were beholden to the corporate oligarchy, as either its political or media representatives. A discussion of the writers strike would have reminded the viewing audience of the reality of social struggle in America and might have touched on issues—social inequality, the relentless corporate drive to lower costs at the expense of the working population—that everyone involved preferred not to have discussed.

The current bitter conflict pits the writers against a number of massive corporations, pillars of the US ruling elite. This Hollywood wing of the elite plays a particularly significant role in bankrolling the Democratic Party. While both Clinton and Obama released statements at the beginning of the strike expressing their support for the writers, that was merely for public relations purposes. In reality, the two Democratic hopefuls depend heavily on the largesse of film and television executives—at present stubbornly refusing the writers' modest demands and smearing them in the media—for campaign funds.

Late last February, for example, during the Presidents' Day recess of Congress, Obama's campaign organized a \$2,300-per-ticket Beverly Hills reception, attended by film stars, studio executives and others, which raised some \$1.3 million.

Not to be outdone, in March 2007 the Clinton campaign raised \$2.6 million at a Beverly Hills gala held at the estate of supermarket billionaire Ronald Burkle, also attended by Hollywood leading lights.

Like the Democratic Party establishment as a whole, the media and entertainment elite is divided in its loyalties, or still undecided. Clinton has the support of Rupert Murdoch of News Corp (Fox Television, 20th Century Fox) and National Amusements billionaire Sumner Redstone (CBS, Viacom), former Paramount Studios chief Lansing, Barbra Streisand, Spielberg, Harvey Weinstein and Hugh Hefner.

In his camp Obama has Spielberg's DreamWorks partners Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen, ex-Disney chief Michael Eisner (who denounced the writers' strike as "stupid" in November), producer Norman Lear and Sony Pictures Entertainment Chairman Michael Lynton, among others.

After Thursday's tepid debate, as one commentator noted, "it was off to even more important business, as Obama drove up the street to the Avalon nightclub and Hillary headed west toward the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, each to attend \$2,300-per-ticket fundraisers."

In the 2008 election cycle so far the television, film and music industry has provided the various candidates with \$15,354,208 in contributions, 77 percent of that going to the Democrats (www.opensecrets.org). Individuals or Political Action Committees involved in movie production specifically have handed over \$4,175,659—91 percent to the Democratic Party.

On the list of top industries contributing to the Clinton campaign, "television, music and movies" ranks 7th, having given \$2.1 million. The same industry ranks 6th on Obama's list, having contributed \$2.2 million. Clinton has received \$6.3 million from the Los Angeles-Long Beach, California area (with \$565,525 coming from Beverly Hills), while Obama has taken in \$5.1 million from the same area.

Among the top 20 contributors to the Clinton campaign organized by individual firm, along with banking and investment giants Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, Citigroup, JP Morgan

Chase, Merrill Lynch and Bear Stearns, one finds Redstone's National Amusements (\$193,850), Time Warner (\$124,150) and Murdoch's News Corp (\$99,350).

On Obama's list, in addition to Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers, JP Morgan Chase, Citigroup, UBS, Morgan Stanley and Credit Suisse, one again comes across the names of National Amusements (\$220,950) and Time Warner (\$142,718).

The prominence of Time Warner on both lists is noteworthy, so too the personal contributions of Barry Meyer, chairman and CEO of Warner Bros (a division of Time Warner), to both the Clinton and Obama campaigns. The debate Thursday was

broadcast on CNN, another division of Time Warner, and moderated by the cable network's Wolf Blitzer. Warner Bros is one of the companies currently struck by the writers and Meyer is considered to be one of their most intransigent opponents.

Is it any wonder then that the writers' situation never came up for discussion Thursday? No, it's not.

Looking at the Los Angeles debate under something of a social microscope, one sees the present political situation in the US summed up: the two-party system disenfranchises the vast majority of the population for the benefit of a plutocracy that runs everything.

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