

The film and television writers' strike: the dead-end of the trade union perspective

By David Walsh
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Recent developments indicate that the leadership of the Writers Guild (WGA) is responding to considerable pressure from the media and political establishment to settle the film and television writers strike on terms essentially set by the conglomerates.

This week the WGA entered into “informal” talks with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), announcing at the same time it was dropping demands for jurisdiction over animation and reality shows. Additionally, the WGA, West Board of Directors voted not to picket the Grammy awards.

Taken as a whole, these moves indicate a more conciliatory attitude on the union's part.

Pressure on the Writers Guild leadership has been exerted in a particularly sharp form since a tentative agreement was reached last week between the Directors Guild (DGA) and the studios and networks—a miserable deal that enshrines the right of the entertainment giants to monopolize the wealth created by the Internet and other new media.

If writers were to accept the terms of the DGA contract, either on ad-supported streaming or paid downloads, it would mean the defeat of the struggle and set back their efforts for years.

The AMPTP reached an accord with the Directors Guild, perhaps adding a little more cash than they had hoped to have to spend, to undermine the writers' strike and preempt a conflict with the actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild, whose contract expires next summer.

On cue, the media—especially in Los Angeles and New York—has been full of praise for the DGA's ‘reasonable’ approach and offered sober-minded advice to the writers to the effect that they should abandon their ‘intransigence’ and follow the directors' lead.

A variety of “disinterested” Hollywood luminaries has weighed in, including actor Alec Baldwin (“I'm not against strikes, but I'm against strikes when we're in a time of war. ... People need to regroup and decide that it's probably in everybody's interest if we go back to work soon”); multi-millionaire producer Jerry Bruckheimer, several of whose profitable television programs have been shut down as a result of the strike (“There is enormous pressure on everybody to settle this and move on”); “Law & Order”

producer Dick Wolf (“If the WGA rejects the basic concepts of a DGA deal, there's going to be a great deal of dissatisfaction among the membership. ... The bottom line here is: This town should be back to work in three weeks”); and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (who told the *Los Angeles Times* that the agreement between the directors and studios could “very well be a motivational vehicle for people to come together”).

The leadership of the WGA is inevitably susceptible to such pressure. The writers' strike has profound social and political dimensions. Anyone who thinks this conflict has merely been about larger residual payments or even the future of the Internet is deluding him- or herself. The media giants certainly perceive the writers' walkout as a threat, a potentially ‘socialistic’ threat, to their absolute dominance over film, television and other media.

The companies' ruthlessness is not shaped solely by financial concerns, but by a determination to maintain ideological control over these powerful mass media.

The two issues—economic and artistic—are inseparable. The same elite that intends to reduce costs and lower or eliminate the writers' residuals and other payments also means to keep the writers under its thumb in terms of what and how they write. It is not possible, as bitter experience has demonstrated, to lead an honorable intellectual life in Hollywood while kowtowing to the studio and network chiefs.

The careers of some of the American film industry's greatest figures, from Chaplin to Orson Welles, or, for that matter, the efforts of F. Scott Fitzgerald as a screenwriter, demonstrate the incompatibility of the most serious efforts with the ideological and financial interests of the studio owners.

The situation is far worse today than it was decades ago. The film studios and television networks are subsidiaries of transnational corporations, for whom the decisions could hardly be more cut and dried. Whatever fails to earn immediate profits and helps drive up share prices will be axed.

At the same time, the growth of genuine solidarity among writers, actors and others will inevitably tend to generate more socially critical and left-wing artistic work. A process of radicalization has begun, with serious implications.

All in all, the interests and the trajectories of the writers and the entertainment conglomerates are mutually exclusive.

The WGA leadership operates from a different perspective, a trade unionist and reformist one. In a recent message to the strikers, reporting on the informal talks, the guild leaders write: “We are grateful for this opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion with industry leaders that we hope will lead to a contract.” Insofar as their tone reflects their real thinking, this is dangerous nonsense. The companies are out for blood and deluding oneself about that will only assist their efforts. If this is diplomatic language, for whose benefit is it being employed? The studios and networks won’t be impressed.

Unprepared for an all-out confrontation with the massive companies, behind whom stand the entire American ruling elite, including the Democratic Party, the WGA has begun to make its mollifying gestures.

The strike, during which writers have made considerable sacrifices, is in danger because of the bankruptcy of the trade union perspective. The companies have no intention of making a decent offer, of meeting the writers’ extremely modest demands even halfway. They have been intransigent from the beginning. Merely walking picket lines is not going to change this fact.

At a certain point, even assuming the best of intentions, any leadership that accepts the legitimacy of corporate control over films and television will find itself in a blind alley. What if the companies just refuse to pay? What then? The grave danger exists that the WGA leaders will simply return to the membership and say, ‘Well, under the given circumstances, this is the best we can do.’

However, it is precisely those ‘given circumstances’—the private ownership of the vast media and entertainment

resources—that have to be challenged. The problem has to be traced to its roots, in the existing socio-economic structures. The intellectual efforts and living conditions of writers and others cannot continue to be at the mercy of the Rupert Murdochs, Robert Igers, Leslie Moonveses and the rest. The film and television community cannot afford these pirates.

Moreover, the writers’ strike has lasted long enough that it now takes place under conditions of the threatened unraveling of the US and world economy. The slide into slump is one of the social realities that writers and their supporters have to begin to consider seriously. Capitalism is in immense crisis. Writers cannot guarantee decent living and working conditions for themselves in isolation from the rest of the working population. Only a decisive break with the Democratic Party and the emergence of a new mass social movement, anti-capitalist and internationalist in outlook, can confront this new reality.

On a variety of blogs and web sites, writers have offered their own analyses of the recent DGA settlement, many of them negative. But the comments are politically extremely limited. The writers, like other sections of the American working population, will try out many individualistic and pragmatic solutions in the face of their difficult situation. A socialist perspective is still far from many minds, or there is a reluctance to accept it.

However, whatever prejudices and illusions there may be among the writers and their supporters, economic and social reality will have its say. It is going to deliver some very harsh blows. In the end, there will be no avoiding the great class and political questions of the day.