

Ninety percent of voting Writers' Guild of America members authorize strike

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The voting membership of the Writers' Guild of America (WGA) has authorized the union to go on strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) November 1, the day after the present contract expires.

The combined WGA membership of both East and West Coast branches is approximately 12,000. Writers on both coasts cast almost 6,000 ballots; 90.3 percent backed the strike authorization. It was the highest turnout in the history of the guild, considerably greater than the 4,128 who voted to ratify the 2001 contract.

Nick Counter, president of AMPTP, tried to shrug off the vote by stating that a "strike authorization vote is a pro forma tactic used by every union in the country, and usually the vote is overwhelmingly in favor of a strike."

But he underestimates the anger among the rank and file of the WGA, whose average wage is a little over \$5,000 a year. The pro-strike vote gives some indication of the frustration that writers are feeling. They have seen the studios, component parts of giant conglomerates, raking in massive profits and studio executives rewarded with tens of millions of dollars in compensation.

"There are a lot of angry writers out there," one WGA member in Los Angeles told the WSWS. "Three years ago, under our leadership, the producers took us for a ride with the issue of residuals from DVDs and the Internet. We kept working and we advanced zip. I'm sure—I know—there are an awful lot of producers and studio executives running around stockpiling TV shows and trying to get film scripts finished before the October 31 deadline. You could say they're scared of another strike like the one in 1988, which cost them about \$500 million."

It's not quite clear how many of the pro-strike ballots

had been mailed in to the Guild's headquarters before the AMPTP announced last week that it had given up on one of its most provocative bargaining proposals: the payment of no residuals (royalties) from the sale of DVDs until after the studios recoup the cost of films and television projects.

That is, under the original proposal, writers would have received residuals *only* after the companies showed a net profit from the sales, not from gross income. But Hollywood bookkeeping is legendary for its distance from reality, and even after a movie or a television program has brought in hundreds of millions of dollars the studios often claim it has been unprofitable.

As an entertainment lawyer was quoted saying in one of the trade papers, "The only word dirtier in this town [Hollywood] than 'net profits' is 'casting couch.'" All major stars, some of whom have sued the studios on this issue, now demand a percentage of gross income, not profits.

The fact is that while the market for DVDs has expanded enormously over the past 20 years, sometimes even accounting for a studio's major source of revenue, the residual rate for writers has remained unchanged since 1985: 20 percent of wholesale revenues. On the other hand, the studios claim that maintaining the present arrangement is necessary for their survival as costs soar.

Another point of contention in the battle between the writers and the studios is the compensation the latter reap from the new technology, such as the Internet. Writers get nothing from television programs shown on cyberspace while the networks and the studios reap fortunes. In many instances, writers are made to work for free by writing advertisements for these shows.

As one writer who spoke at length with the WSWS

said: “Writers are also being asked to write snippet scenes for podcasts as part of production for TV shows. The writers’ argument is on advertisements. Look, the writer’s job is to write the show and deliver a good script for a good show. By shifting the promotion on the writers, the producers are asking us—and in some cases telling us—to engage in advertisement, which is a totally different thing from writing the show.

“I anticipate that if I get a series going, I’m going to have to do this extra stuff. Let’s say I’m asked to pull together a podcast, well, my feelings are that I’m being asked to advertise and should be paid for it. If I got paid, hey, I would help promote it. And why not? If you’re doing work for advertising, then producers should pay you for it.

“This type of advertising is now kind of expected. When they ask you to do three podcasts without any compensation, now, that’s abusive.

“And you cannot make the work of writers as if it were tailor-made for mass assembly. If I owned a part of what we produced, then we would feel part of it instead of a work-for-hire.

“Now, if they’re seeking extra services for DVDs, we should receive residuals for it. They’ve figured a way to market entire box sets of television programs. I can assure the WWSWS that if writers get anything from those, it is very little.”

There is talk in Hollywood that the Writers’ Guild might wait until the expiration of the 100,000-member Screen Actors’ Guild contract next June 30 (the same day as the Directors’ Guild contract ends) to go on strike so as to be in a better bargaining position.

If union officials are spreading such ideas, it is because they want to avoid a struggle with the AMPTP. The rank and file of the Guild should call their own strike and then appeal to the rest of the industry’s workers, both union and nonunion, including the craft ones, to back it. The writers must appeal to the entire working-class of Los Angeles for its support, not the politicians, whose Republican and Democratic representatives, including ex-union bureaucrat Mayor Antonio Villarraigosa, are in the pockets of the studios and other corporations.

Dramatic changes have taken place in the entertainment field. At the time of the 1988 writers’ strike, the studios and networks couldn’t belong to the same entity, whereas they are now owned by

international conglomerates. Twenty years ago, competition from cable was at best tenuous, even experimental. But now cable television has developed into a mammoth enterprise that competes fiercely for viewers who previously had no other choice but ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox. Twenty years ago who had heard of iPods or even DVDs?

There is every indication that the writers’ union bureaucracy is willing to come to a rotten agreement with the studio owners, just as they did three years ago, when the same issue of DVD residuals came up and the writers got nothing.

WGA West President Patric Verrone told the *Hollywood Reporter* that he hoped “the resounding voice of our members will convince the [studio] CEOs and the cooler heads to prevail and to begin to bargain over these issues.... We have these next 10 days to make a deal, and so from our perspective a strike is no more possible or probable than it has been.”

During the last negotiations the union ordered its members to keep working past the contract deadline. In the end, they lost the battle for just compensation from DVD revenues.



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