

The Democratic Party candidates and the writers' strike

David Walsh

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The statements in support of the film and television writers' strike issued by the three leading candidates for the Democratic Party presidential nomination—Senators Hillary Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois and former North Carolina senator John Edwards—are a complete fraud.

Not only are these individuals—all multi-millionaires themselves—connected to and financed by the Hollywood moguls ranged against the writers, this trio of big business politicians stands for war, political reaction and the profit system, everything that genuinely creative people ought to despise.

In his statement, Obama said, "I stand with the writers. The Guild's demand is a test of whether media corporations are going to give writers a fair share of the wealth their work creates or continue concentrating profits in the hands of their executives."

Clinton remarked that she supported the "Writers Guild's pursuit of a fair contract that pays them for their work in all mediums. I hope the producers and writers will return to the bargaining table to work out an equitable contract that keeps our entertainment industry strong and recognizes the contributions writers make to the success of the industry."

Edwards asserted that the writers were "fighting an important battle to protect their creative rights. These writers deserve to be compensated fairly for their work, and I commend their courage in standing up to big media conglomerates."

This is all nonsense. Behind the scenes, Clinton, Obama and Edwards, or their advisers, are reassuring their wealthy backers in the entertainment business that their statements were for public consumption only and that the interests of the studio executives remain dear to their hearts. In fact, such reassurances would not be necessary. The wily operators who run Hollywood understand the way these things work: to continue receiving support from voters, especially working class voters, the Democrats must posture as the party of the "average man," even as the policies they pursue serve the interests of the tiny ruling elite.

The Democratic Party is wedded to the Hollywood establishment. According to opensecrets.org, the Democrats have received more than \$14,000,000 in contributions from the television, film and music industry for the 2008 election cycle, \$11,000,000 from individuals—77 percent of the contributions from this sector.

As individuals, media and entertainment moguls make their contributions, pocket change for such people. Rupert Murdoch has

contributed \$2,300 to Hillary Clinton; Fox's Peter Chernin has given \$4,600 to Clinton, \$2,100 to Christopher Dodd and \$2,100 to Barack Obama; Robert Iger, president of Disney, has contributed \$2,000 to Dodd's campaign. However, these executives cajole their colleagues into donating cash and organize fundraisers at which enormous sums are raised for the Democratic Party's coffers. In this fashion, they funnel tens of millions of dollars to their favored party, which they see as the more reliable defender of their interests.

Earlier this year, during the Presidents' Day recess of Congress, the Obama campaign grabbed the headlines by organizing a \$2,300-per-ticket Beverly Hills reception, attended by film stars, studio executives and others. The affair raised some \$1.3 million. Not to be outdone, Clinton raked in a similar amount from a gathering also held in Beverly Hills, at the home of a supermarket billionaire.

According to an article in the September 2004 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*, "In 2002 entertainment ranked first among all industries funding Democratic Party committees ... From 1989 up to the start of the current election cycle Hollywood had given the party nearly \$100 million for federal elections alone ... Together with organized labor and the trial bar, Hollywood is now one of the three pillars of the Democrats' financial structure."

The writers are engaged in a bitter conflict with the same conglomerates that finance the Democrats. The announcement by Fox, Paramount, Disney and Warner Brothers that they were stopping payments to production companies largely financed by the studios, which will mean layoffs of hundreds of assistants and production managers, should drive home, if it needed to be, the ruthlessness of these companies.

The decision by the Writers Guild to solicit and promote the would-be candidates' statements speaks to a central problem facing the American working class: the alliance of the unions with the Democrats, which has had the most disastrous consequences. The inability of the unions to oppose cuts in jobs, factory and plant closures and the destruction of social programs, which has resulted in poverty or declining living standards for millions, is directly related to their political subordination to a party of big business.

The Writers Guild, or its forerunner, the Screen Writers Guild, was established by left-wing and socialist-minded writers in the 1930s, including members of the Communist Party. The founders of the writers' union envisioned their organization as a vehicle for a fight against the employers and, more generally, for the socialist

transformation of society. The McCarthyite witch-hunts did terrible damage to the writers' organization, as it did to the entire labor movement. The anti-communist, nationalist union bureaucracy that emerged proved incapable, in the long run, of defending even the most minimal rights and gains of the American working class. A "labor movement" purged of socialists and left-wing forces is not worthy of the name.

The alliance of the unions with the Democrats goes a long way toward explaining why the writers and other workers find themselves in their present predicament. As long as socialism remains a forbidden concept, or something only to be discussed in undertones, the working population in the US will be unable to resist the relentless assault on its conditions of life.

In the first few days of their strike, writers have expressed to reporters from the WSWS an enormous hostility toward the giant conglomerates that dominate the industry. The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers claims to represent 350 production companies and studios. In reality, it speaks for a handful of giants, in particular Time Warner, Disney, Viacom and News Corp. The writers only express in an articulate and vocal fashion the visceral opposition to the dictates and greed of the corporate elite shared by wide layers of the American population.

By a peculiar twist of fate, the film and television writers find themselves in the position of speaking for a considerable portion of the working population. On the other hand, the studio chiefs find themselves isolated and generally despised. But this is a reflection in popular consciousness of an objective social reality. The piling up of vast fortunes—salaries and compensation packages that run into the tens of millions of dollars annually—has separated the elite from the rest of the population, even relatively affluent layers. This social gap in *reality* is beginning to make itself felt, as it must do, in *thinking*. This has enormous political implications.

The elemental hostility of the film artists to their corporate employers, however, needs to be politically and culturally enlarged and developed.

Writers need to reject out of hand the opportunist effort by the Democrats to identify with their struggle and the collaboration in that hoax by the WGA leadership.

Returned to power in Congress in November 2006 largely as a result of widespread opposition to the war in Iraq, the Democrats have voted for or facilitated the continued spending of hundreds of billions of dollars on that criminal enterprise. Clinton, Obama and Edwards have each promised that US forces would still be in Iraq at the end of his or her first term in the White House in 2013. Their redeployment strategy, which would retain tens of thousands of US forces in Iraq, reflects merely a tactical difference with Bush's war policy. The entire American ruling elite agrees that a colonial-style occupation of the Middle East is necessary to wrest control of the region's huge energy reserves.

The Democrats have done nothing to stop the massive and illegal spying of the National Security Agency and they voted in large numbers for the Patriot Act, the Military Commissions Act and the various other measures that have laid the basis for a police-state in the US. They have never seriously opposed the existence of secret CIA torture prisons around the world.

Key Senate Democrats recently assured the confirmation of

Bush's nominee for attorney general, Michael Mukasey, an individual who refused to declare illegal the US government's use of "water-boarding" against its detainees. The Democrats' silence over the imposition of martial law in Pakistan, which has resulted in the jailing of a large portion of the political opposition, speaks volumes about their commitment to "democracy."

The time has come for a genuine revival of socialist thinking and culture in the US. An instinctive antagonism toward giant conglomerates needs to become a consciously worked out opposition to capitalism. Artists ought to reflect and think deeply about life. By nature, if they are the genuine article, they abhor war, brutality, oppression and the official lies that sustain all that. But such intuition must become a systematic program and platform for artists. A decisive break with the Democrats is an essential component of such a program.

This also means challenging and criticizing themselves artistically. Despite the enormous talent available, there is far too much conformism in US film and television, too much obedience to authority, too much worship of the military and the police and a general timidity in opposing reaction and backwardness. Genuine expressions of opposition and resistance to official ideology are still all too rare. Much of the output of the film and television industry remains trivial and avoids looking squarely at and engaging with life.

The writers have found considerable support. Nonetheless, the companies are counting on the fact that in a few weeks' time, the initial enthusiasm will have worn off, production on many films and television programs will have continued unaffected, and the writers will find themselves isolated on the picket lines. To prevent this from happening, writers and their supporters will have to consider the critical social and political issues lodged in their struggle and develop a new strategy based on a conscious opposition to corporate dominance of the entertainment industry.



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