

# Interviews with striking writers and supporters

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WSWS reporters spoke with striking workers in New York City and several locations in Los Angeles.

The first picket lines appeared in New York City Monday morning. Hundreds of members of the Writers Guild of America, East set up a picket line outside NBC's headquarters at Rockefeller Center in Manhattan. On the picket line, chanting "No contract, no shows," were writers for nightly talk shows like "The Late Show With David Letterman" and "The Daily Show," soap operas like "As the World Turns" and several dramatic series.

A number of strikers fanned out along 5th Avenue, leafleting passersby and appealing for support.

Charlie Rubin, who has worked as a writer and producer and served as the WGA shop steward on the NBC program "Law & Order: Criminal Intent," spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"I think that the membership is very strong right now, but then the membership is always strong at the beginning of a strike; the question is how they hold up over the long haul. I am very confident that they will hold on. People are determined that we fight out things that should have been fought out in 2001. The problem is that we have always found a way to buy into being bought off. And we really got nothing.

"This is the first strike since 1988. We are very sensitive to the effects that such a strike will have, and not just on writers, but on the people we work with, day-in, day-out. At the same time, it is important for us to stand up for ourselves. We cannot accept a situation in which our work is being used without our approval or our knowledge and, moreover, with no remuneration."

Charlie, who also teaches television writing at New York University, said that his students were very supportive of the walkout, and many had wanted to join the picket line.

"Of course, I tell them, 'Don't cross a picket line, because, in the first place, I'll kill you.' Just kidding. But I do tell them that they may confront this kind of situation and be told by the studios that this is an opportunity, a great chance to start their careers. What they do about it is the difference between ethics and opportunity. It is something that they will live with for the rest of their lives. And it will determine what kind of writers they are, and what kind of human beings they are."

He added that those who work on the program—the actors, directors and staff—had all been "amazingly supportive" of the strike. "We work very closely together, and I think they like us as much as we like them."

Asked if he thought the writers' strike was bound up with a broader social movement in the US against the attacks of the corporations on working people, he replied, "My in-laws are from Michigan and they feel that the auto industry has devastated that area with the destruction of jobs and whole communities. I would like to believe that things are starting to turn around in terms of labor."

Diana Son, who has also written for "Law and Order Criminal Intent" for the past five years, told the WSWS: "The major issues are the residuals, the new media and the re-runs. Our contribution is critical, and we are seeking a fair return on what they charge. There is no show without

writers. Everybody's favorite show is good because of the writers. We are highly skilled labor. Not everyone can write TV shows. At the same time we see ourselves as part of the labor movement. The companies are trying to save money on the lives of the writers. They want cutbacks on our health care and pensions, just like the autoworkers. All we want to do is eke out a living for our families, just like everyone else.

"I love to write. I've been writing since the age of nine. As a writer, if I had the resources, if I was free to write something of my own personal expression, it would be totally different than what I am paid to write. It would be personal stories in a political context. I am very interested in the corruption of the food industry. For example, things are labeled organic, but they are grown with pesticides.

"I want to write good stuff, but I don't think my work should be given away for free. The companies know that the Internet will be the main broadcasting form in the future. I don't think that I should give up my residuals for the benefit of the profit of the companies."

Pippin Parker, who has written for television, film, children's shows, animation and radio theater, was also on the picket line outside of Rockefeller Center.

Asked if the issues in the strike were important to him, he replied, "They're extremely important. My wife is pregnant, and I would like to be able to continue getting health care.

"But the real issue is the survival of the middle class writer. That's what residuals mean. We turn over our work when it's done. They hold the copyrights and we are participants in future revenue, similar to a songwriter or a novelist. Getting residuals for the reuse of our work means that writers can continue to support themselves and continue working.

"We are willing to discuss any figure for residuals except zero, and that is all they are offering."

Asked about the press reports highlighting writers making millions of dollars in income and claiming that the average salary for a WGA member is \$200,000 a year, Pippin responded: "About 45 percent of the writers on the East Coast are unemployed. Those who are working make decent salaries, when they are working. But many of us don't make enough in a year to even qualify for health benefits.

"The main issue in this strike is holding the line on reproducing the kind of social stratification that you see here in New York City among professional writers themselves.

"One of the things feeding this is the conglomeratization of the media. In the last eight years this has become extremely pronounced. It is part and parcel of what is happening in a lot of other industries. Big corporations run everything.

"This definitely affects the content of what is written. It is not like a blacklist or something; it's more subtle. There are just fewer places to sell your wares, and you are forced to tailor your work to what is acceptable to the corporate buyer. There are no more mini-major studios; they've all been bought up. Even cable is dominated by corporations. And the people we deal with on the executive level are under enormous bottom-line pressure.

"I think this strike may be part of a resurgence of the labor movement. There is a lot of sympathy for us on the basic pocketbook issues. People see that the working person is becoming more and more insignificant to these corporations."

Strikers began setting up picket lines outside ABC Television Center at Prospect Studios in the east end of Hollywood around 9 a.m. For about 30 minutes the picketers were busy setting up. One picketer had a sign saying "AFTRA [American Federation of Television and Radio Artists] in solidarity with screenwriters," and a few others were Screen Actors Guild (SAG) members.

A WSWS reporter spoke to Mark Wilding, the picket captain, a writer for "Grey's Anatomy," one of the top-rated prime time shows:

"The conglomerates plead poverty, but they are telling their shareholders they are making billions. Their profit is up 19 percent over the last three years. They are making a lot of money on the shows we write for; we want our fair share.

"Writers are far from rich. Forty-five percent of our members did not write last year. We are all united on this.

"The head of Merrill Lynch resigned because of bad performance and got something like \$150 million. Our entire membership is asking for a smaller amount than this one man.

"Residuals are vitally important. Many writers have to survive on them during lean years of little work.

"The union is asking 6 percent on DVD revenue, which is still quite low. We are now getting less than 4 percent. The people making the DVD boxes get more per unit than do the writers.

"As to the Internet, we want this same percentage if they are making money. They want to call Internet revenue from distribution of product supported by advertising revenue 'promotional' and not pay anything. But TV revenue is also based on sales of advertising.

"The strike will go on as long as management is intransigent. This is an important fight for other workers in the industry, including actors and directors. The precedent set in our fight will apply to them. We are fighting for our brother and sister actors and directors as well."

Outside Paramount Studios, WSWS reporters spoke to a number of strikers and supporters, who were enthusiastically and noisily picketing in front of the studio's famed gates on Melrose Avenue in Hollywood.

Jonathan Fernandez told the WSWS: "We're unbelievably unified. The producers started with rollbacks. They wanted to get rid of our residuals, pensions, there were all sorts of rollbacks and that unified the guild like I've never seen it.

"The situation for the average writer? Forty-nine percent of our guild last year was unemployed. The 'average writer' isn't working. Sixty percent of the guild is earning under \$70,000 a year. These are middle class people, these are working class people.

"I think when you look at the DVD residuals that were paid to the writers collectively last year, it was \$56 million for 12,000 writers. Then when you compare that to what Tom Freston [president and CEO of Viacom until his resignation in September 2006] got when he was fired from Viacom, that's \$75 million. So 12,000 people are making less than one person.

"I think the general public understands that health care, working class issues, these are their issues too. I think corporate greed is offensive to anyone.

Sam, a writer and SAG member, told the WSWS:

"I think in the past the union hasn't had the solidarity and clarity that they have now. And you're seeing a show of force that you've never seen before from this union, and they're expecting us to be pushovers. But the truth is 80 to 90 percent of these residuals would be wiped out in the future and they look at writers like they are pieces of furniture that can be replaced.

"You know, the people that are truly behind this make \$25 million to

\$75 million a year in payouts, the average writer is unemployed. And I'm sure from your point of view, from your web site, you understand that they control the media. So it's difficult, it's difficult.

"One of the nice things about this as opposed to 1988 is the existence of the Internet, so that writers and others can go online and get some points of view that haven't been completely obliterated. This guy writing for *Variety* shouldn't even call himself a writer.

"Why is there a changed mood among the writers? This is an issue that would wipe many people out. It's not about our being greedy, it's about our attempting to sustain ourselves during the time when so many writers don't work.

"There's so much vitriol coming from the producers. They don't want to give up a penny? Why would they, if the guild has folded in the past? The truth is they're not prepared for the kind of solidarity and clarity that this present union has.

"I'm not happy that the guild has dropped the demand on the DVD residuals. I'm a screenwriter. A lot of people are saying that's a thing of the past, so if we're going to give up anything, we should give that up and concentrate on new media where it's all headed. Personally, I would like the guild to not drop any of their demands until some of ours are met. I hope they hold tight on the rest of their demands and wait.

"It took me 10 years before I was employed fully, 10 years of writing for free. I was a comedian for years, I'm a screenwriter and I did many, many things for 'Comedy Central' and I never saw another penny after they ran them a thousand times and remixed them into other shows and called them something else.

"I'm not optimistic that it's going to end quickly, because they haven't even had an adult conversation about it yet."

Jack Kenny, screenwriter, told a WSWS reporter, "To me the most important issue is the Internet, the new media, because that's the future. Pretty soon television is going to be delivered directly to your computer. If we don't get a deal on the table now, in 20 years no one will get residuals at all, and people won't be able to pay their mortgages and send their kids to school.

"A lot of writers depend on those residuals, they're half their income.

"When you go to the web sites and see every single network show is available on their web site for free and there are ads during those programs. So if they're selling ads to Madison Avenue ... I know Madison Avenue doesn't buy time if it doesn't know what it's worth. They're saying it's 'promotional,' it's new, we don't know how much it's making ...

"It's the same thing they said in '88 about DVDs and last year they made \$40 billion selling DVDs, and they paid us 4 cents on every one.

"When they talk to their shareholders, it's, 'Oh, we're making tremendous profits, we're doing great, keep buying the stock,' and when they talk to us: 'We're poor, we're not making any money, we can't pay you anything.'

"I'm a TV writer. I created a show called "The Book of Daniel" a couple of years ago, and a show called "Titus" a few years before that. I've been a member of the guild since 1987.

"I think the conglomerates know what's right. They're trying to squeeze as much as they can.

Nancy De Los Santos, another screenwriter outside Paramount, told the WSWS: "I think the central issue is the jurisdiction over the Internet. It's just so important, that is the new frontier. We should get paid when our writing goes out over the Internet.

"It's fiscally and morally wrong, it's hurting the middle class of this city. Because we are all middle class writers. When they talk about writers making \$200,000 a year, believe me, a lot of people on this line wish they had an income like that. We're freelancers. My income looks like a graph of ... I don't know what, it goes up and down like crazy.

"I'm so glad that you're here. Recently I had the honor, I'm a strike

captain, and I'm responsible for 60 people. I was emailing all of my people, and one of them didn't have an email address, one out of 60. So I called, it was a member of our guild who was blacklisted in 1953, a blacklisted writer, who has been a member since 1946. And he was blacklisted for being a member of the Communist Party.

"I took him to our big meeting. He's 90 years and still active. It was frightening to hear this from this man, that he was blacklisted for 10 years.

"What are they doing to us now? Why are they preventing us from doing what we were put on god's earth to do, we're supposed to be writers. They want to go back to the wild, wild west, where they just pay you what they want. And if they don't like you, out the door."

A SAG member supporting the strikers remarked, "I am a member of SAG and we as actors are facing the same issues as the writers. We need our fair share from the Internet so we're not exploited where our image is concerned; so that we get fair compensation. The writers who write, the actors who act—they add quality to the products they make. Either we collectively bargain or we'll collectively beg."



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