

US film and television writers launch their struggle

David Walsh in Los Angeles
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Twelve thousand members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) walked off the job Monday morning, as negotiators for the union and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) broke off talks Sunday night at 9:30 West Coast time, without reaching an agreement. The Writers Guild in New York had officially declared a strike at 12:01 Eastern time, 9 p.m. in Hollywood. This is the first writers' strike in nearly 20 years. No talks are currently scheduled between the two sides.

According to *Variety*, a number of “back-channel efforts to stave off the strike culminated” in the Sunday talks. Federal mediator Juan Carlos Gonzalez, who joined the negotiations one week ago, brought both sides together after the WGA officially announced Friday that it was calling a strike.

“Several CEOs were believed to be pushing to jump-start the bargaining process—CBS topper Les Moonves, Disney’s Robert Iger, Fox’s Peter Chernin and Warner Bros. Barry Meyer—but none were among the 25 or so attendees at Sunday’s session.” In the end, nothing came of the last-minute talks.

Pickets set up lines in New York City Monday morning in Rockefeller Plaza, near NBC and other television network headquarters. Picket lines were set up outside at least 15 locations—film studios and television networks—in the Los Angeles area. Numerous actors, directors and producers joined picket lines in support of the writers.

Picket lines were large and enthusiastic in Los Angeles. Many drivers honked their horns in support of the strikers. There is little love lost for giant conglomerates within broad sections of the US population. The press is denigrating the writers as overpaid and spoiled, but regular news items about the fortunes being earned by film and television studios

and the multimillion-dollar salaries received by media moguls undermine the effectiveness of such a campaign.

In a sign of the seriousness of the dispute and the social tensions aroused, a car struck and injured a striking writer Outside the Sunset-Gower Studios in Los Angeles, allegedly by a driver who witnesses said threatened to run over the strikers if they didn’t move out of his way.

Writer Linda Berston, who witnessed the incident, told KABC-TV news, “The guy basically said, ‘Get the ‘F’ out of the way, and then hit the gas and just plowed into this guy.” Berston continued, “The group was just walking across the driveway, and the guy basically started running him over without giving him a chance to move out of the way.” The writer apparently received leg injuries.

Variety reported that the police were called, but the driver was not arrested. The police claimed the incident was “inadvertent,” and noted that they had received calls about the crowd of strikers being “unruly.”

Teamsters Local 399 members were reportedly refusing to cross picket lines. Also, according to the Deadline Hollywood blog, “WGA members Steve Carell and Rainn Wilson [also actors] did not show up today in support of the writers strike, so *The Office* had a short production day.”

A group of writers chanting and shouting through bullhorns stopped the filming of an episode of the television series, “Cane,” outside a café near the CBS lot in Studio City. The *Associated Press* reported, “Tom Hogan, a location manager for the show, says he hired two off-duty Los Angeles police officers in addition to five private security guards to maintain order during the shoot.”

The writers and their employers have been at

loggerheads over residual payments for DVD sales, from which the writers currently earn very little, and for future digital media releases, particularly for material reused on the Internet.

The guild made a major concession in talks Sunday, when it removed its proposal to double DVD payments. There is no reason to have confidence that the Writers Guild leadership will stand up to the cut-throat operators of the film and television industry. Writers and their supporters need to be forewarned. Their efforts to gain reasonable remuneration have been sold out in the past, and Sunday's move is an extremely dangerous sign.

The producers, far from conciliating as a result of the guild's surrender over DVDs, no doubt took it as a sign of weakness. Their spokesman, Nick Counter, responded to the walkout Monday morning with his usual insulting arrogance. Counter claimed that the producers had done everything they could to prevent the strike. In a statement, he declared, "Notwithstanding the fact that negotiations were ongoing, the WGA decided to start their strike in New York. When we asked if they would 'stop the clock' for the purpose of delaying the strike to allow negotiations to continue, they refused.

"We made an attempt at meeting them in a number of their key areas including Internet streaming and jurisdiction in New Media. Ultimately, the guild was unwilling to compromise on most of their major demands. It is unfortunate that they choose to take this irresponsible action."

The WGA, in its statement, reported its withdrawal of the DVD proposal and noted the companies still insisted on rejecting guild jurisdiction for most of new media writing; no economic proposal for "the part of new media writing where they do propose to give coverage"; Internet downloads at the same miserly DVD rate; no residual for streaming video of theatrical product; "A 'promotional' proposal that allows them to reuse even complete movies or TV shows on any platform with no residual. This proposal alone destroys residuals"; and a 'window' of free reuse on the Internet "that makes a mockery of any residual."

NBC announced that its late-night talk show, "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" would immediately begin broadcasting repeats. "The Late Show with David Letterman," on CBS, will also be replaced by

reruns.

Leno, in fact, arrived at NBC's Burbank studio, and visited with strikers on the picket line, bringing them doughnuts. He told the *Los Angeles Times*: "I've been working with these people for 20 years. Without them I'm not funny. I'm a dead man without them. There are a lot of misconceptions about how much these people make. Most of them are not highly paid. Some are, but the average make about 30 grand a year. I'm out here to support the writers. I'm on the writers' side."

Numerous personalities walked on the picket lines Monday, including Tina Fey of "30 Rock," writer Jon Robin Baitz, the creator of ABC's "Brothers & Sisters" and actor Ron Rifkin in New York.

Actresses Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Marg Helgenberger and Rachel Griffiths, Oscar-winning writer-director James L. Brooks, actors John Leguizamo, Peter MacNichol and Billy Baldwin showed up to support the writers in Los Angeles, as did America Ferrera of ABC's "Ugly Betty," performer Vanessa Williams and many others. Ellen DeGeneres did not show up Monday for filming of her daytime talk show. "Ellen did not go to work today in support of her writers," her publicist told reporters. Writer-director Paul Haggis walked the picket line Monday.

The support for the writers is genuine and widespread, both in the industry and within the population. But they are facing ruthless conglomerates determined to set an example. There should be no illusions on that score. The writers must see their struggle in the widest political and social context.



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