

# Broader issues facing US film and television writers

The Editorial Board  
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Negotiators for the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Alliance of Motion Pictures and Television Producers (AMPTP) broke off talks Wednesday, six hours before the expiry of their three-year contract. The two sides, despite the presence of a federal mediator, remain far apart on the key issues of DVD residuals and pay for films and television shows transmitted over the Internet. Writers receive a pittance on DVD sales, according to a formula agreed to 22 years ago.

The AMPTP, representing multibillion-dollar companies, has refused to budge on these issues. Its spokesman Nick Counter declared in a statement addressed to the union, "We want to make a deal. But ... no further movement is possible to close the gap between us so long as your DVD proposal remains on the table."

The WGA has been demanding the doubling of the residuals writers receive from the sale of DVDs and remuneration for programs either transmitted through the Internet or distributed digitally (especially if they are delivered with advertising). Since last July, not only have the producers refused to entertain the idea of increasing the residuals from DVDs, but they initially proposed that the writers submit to a rollback of those benefits. They eventually dropped that demand on October 16.

But on October 26, the producers came back with a new demand: a rollback in the pension and health funds, which is also an important, if secondary, point of contention.

The union responded to Counter's statement Wednesday: "Every issue that matters to writers, including Internet reuse, original writing for new media, DVDs, and jurisdiction, has been ignored [by the AMPTP]. This is completely unacceptable."

Writers are meeting in Los Angeles Thursday evening to consider their options. A walkout on Friday is a distinct possibility.

Last week the writers on both coasts gave the union strike authorization by an overwhelming vote. If the

writers decide to strike, it will be the first time they have gone on picket lines since a five-month strike in 1988, when the studios, including the television networks, lost approximately \$500 million.

Television production would be the most immediately affected by a writers' strike. There was a rush to complete scripts before the expiration of the contract October 31. Those can still be filmed. However, a lengthy strike would mean that most television shows, especially series, would be unable to continue.

The film and television writers face a bitter struggle against giant conglomerates, with strong connections to both political parties in Washington and Sacramento and every section of the American political and media establishment. Leading figures in the AMPTP include Warner Brothers Entertainment Chairman Barry Meyer, CBS Corp CEO Leslie Moonves, News Corp. President Peter Chermin and Disney's chief executive Robert Iger. How many tens of millions of dollars a year do these individuals rake in? How much political clout do they wield?

Writers need to enter into this conflict with their eyes wide open and consider its larger implications.

It is entirely legitimate for the writers and other film artists to demand a far greater share of the revenue generated by DVD sales and new forms of digital media. There is, in fact, no reason to have confidence that the WGA leadership will pursue this fight to the end. Already the union leadership announced that its new proposal to the AMPTP "included movement on DVDs, new media, and jurisdictional issues. We also took nine proposals off the table."

A successful struggle will require the largest possible mobilization of writers, directors, performers, technicians and others in the film industry. More than that, however, it will require the revival of socialist consciousness and opposition to capitalism in the film industry. Those who

work in the industry need to consider film, television and culture generally from the broadest possible vantage point.

The intransigence of the film and television studios, their refusal to give up a cent of their massive profits, points to a far deeper issue: the essential incompatibility of a system based on the private ownership of powerful means of entertainment and communication with not only the immediate needs of film and media workers, but the democratic aspirations and cultural needs of the population as a whole.

Not only are writers' salaries and pensions at the mercy of a handful of entertainment and media giants, so too is the population for what it sees daily on television and cinema screens.

The film and television industry as it stands is organized to satisfy the selfish profit motives of a wealthy elite. In the end, as various battles with censors and studio owners have demonstrated, there is no place for a genuine social critique within this set-up. American films and television programs are admired the world over for their technological advancement and their vivacity, but the degree to which they are obliged to kowtow to corporate, government and military interests appalls writers and film artists—and many others—around the globe.

The struggle of the writers is a reminder of the enormous creativity and effort that goes into film and television production. There is no shortage of artistic skill in these media, but its full potential will never be realized within the present economic framework.

The stance of the producers demonstrates *their* real attitude toward creativity, despite their pious claims. Wealth and money are everything to them. The directors of conglomerates and hedge funds produce nothing of cultural value. Their parasitic activities are carried out at the expense of the broad mass of the population, as the current housing and mortgage meltdown has shown.

The US faces an immense social and political crisis. The financial situation is increasingly unstable, and millions are struggling to make ends meet. The Bush administration is widely and rightly despised for its prosecution of an illegal war and its systematic assault on basic democratic rights. The government is erecting the scaffolding of a police state, while it tortures and abuses “terror suspects” and others around the world.

Those who devote their lives to reflecting on reality must also be increasingly sensitive to the bankruptcy of the Democratic Party and American liberalism. Many of the same producers now confronting the film and

television writers help bankroll the Democrats. The two major political parties are accomplices in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and now threaten to lead the country into the disaster of a war against Iran. The working population needs to declare its political independence and liberate itself from these parties of big business and oppression.

Film and television artists will be obliged to confront these realities.

A resurgence of the socialist movement is absolutely vital. Left-wing perspectives animated many writers, directors and actors in the American film industry in the 1930s and 1940s, a period considered to be the golden age of Hollywood filmmaking. Countless writers saw their work in the context of big social questions: the struggle against fascism and war, working class struggles, opposition to capitalism itself. The McCarthyite anticommunist witch-hunts had a devastating impact on filmmaking and every aspect of American life.

As they undertake a struggle with the film and television producers, writers need to consider the state and future of the entertainment industry as a whole. Increasingly, the elementary needs of film and television artists, as well as the cultural and political interests of the population, are running up against the barrier of the monopoly over entertainment and news exercised by a tiny clique of billionaires.

The massive entertainment and media giants need to be removed from the control of those currently operating them for their own personal gain and become genuine public services, dedicated to the interests of the population. This is the only condition in which genuine creativity will flourish.

Writers and film artists generally, in our view, must begin to see the present struggle within this wider social and political context.



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