

Determined, angry mood among US film and television writers

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As of the posting of this article, no deal has been reached between representatives of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) that would avert a strike by film and television writers scheduled to begin Monday. Unless an agreement is hashed out with the aid of federal mediators late Sunday, pickets will go up at company headquarters and production facilities in New York City and Los Angeles starting at 9 a.m. in each city.

This would be the first time that the WGA, which has approximately 12,000 members (70 percent on the West Coast, 30 percent on the East), has gone on strike in almost two decades.

A principal point of contention between the writers and the AMPTP is the payment of “residuals”—i.e., compensation for the re-airing of films and television shows—on DVD and the internet. Due to a formula accepted by the WGA in 1985, writers currently make \$0.03 or \$0.036 cents on the dollar of every DVD sold, depending upon total wholesale revenues. Initially peddled to the WGA membership as part of an effort to help the media companies develop home video sales, the rate has meant that writers were largely left out of the boom in profits experienced by the film and television studios during the 1990s.

Currently, the hottest area of entertainment expansion is the internet and other forms of telecommunications, whereby viewers can download movies and television shows free of charge. Writers are not compensated for the distribution of their work through this medium, a situation that the AMPTP members insist must remain in place. The producers claim that it is impossible to predict how profitable Internet distribution will be, and therefore no rate can be set for compensating writers.

As the *Minneapolis-St. Paul StarTribune* observed: “Online video is still in its infancy, but its moneymaking potential is salivating. Consider Hulu, a new online video site launched last week to rave reviews by NBC Universal and Fox’s News Corp. The site, which features movies and TV shows such as ‘24,’ ‘The Simpsons’ and ‘Scrubs,’ is one of the most ambitious online efforts yet by an old-school entertainment company. Meanwhile last week, at the Renaissance Hotel [in Hollywood],

next to the Kodak Theatre, entertainment and technology gurus huddled at the ‘Digital Hollywood’ conference, discussing new ways to make money from video on the internet.”

The lead-up to the strike has revealed a determined mood among the Hollywood writers, whose hostility toward the massive media conglomerates is the result of accumulated resentment over the residual issue, but more generally a hostility to the massively wealthy elite that dominates the entertainment industry and the US as a whole. This sentiment is shared by much of the American population.

While distributing leaflets at an informational picket at Rockefeller Center in New York City over the weekend, one striking WGA member told the *New York Times*: “We’re certainly not claiming we’re coal miners. But at the same time, we don’t want to be taken advantage of.”

“It’s the middle class versus the CEOs,” said Sivert Glarum, a writer for “Rules of Engagement” and “King of the Hill,” to the *Los Angeles Times* on Saturday.

Many writers are submitting statements to online blogs to express their sentiments.

On *UnitedHollywood.com*, one contributor noted that the top executive of the media companies make upwards of \$50 million a year and warned her fellow WGA members that the plan of the AMPTP is to “to winnow down your membership, to snip away at your MBA [Minimum Basic Agreement], to chew away at your health & pension plans until there’s just nothing left of the WGA. Why? Because they’ve had a good strong drink of how much money they make off of animation when they don’t have to cut the creators in for any of the cash, and now they want to extend that free ride to all of live action as well.”

Other writers have expressed their anger at not only the studios, but also the media.

“There has been a lot of negative and false information fed to the press lately about how the average WGA member makes over 200K per year and that the guild is being unreasonable in its contract negotiations and that basically we’re all a bunch of left leaning, privileged, silver-spoon fed, pinko cry babies,” wrote strike captain and writer-director George Hickenlooper on *UnitedHollywood.com*.

“The reality is none of this is true,” he continued.

“The other big reality is that the future of *all* television is *internet* bound, a paid advertising medium for which each and every Guild member currently has *zero* financial participation. With entertainment industry executives and studios raking in exponential profits every year and hiding much of those profits through creative accounting and fuzzy math, it is *essential* that, as members of the WGA, we stand up for what is only reasonable and just. The studios have forced us into this position through their greed and hubris. The attitude at the executive level often is that these movies and TV shows write themselves when in reality the obscene profits they are making always start with us, the writers.”

Having enjoyed the benefits of the grossly undervalued DVD residual rate up to this point, the film and television studios are digging in their heels and, according to some news reports, are prepared to weather an extended strike to secure their position in the area of distribution through “new media.”

As director Barry Levinson, a supporter of the writers, noted in a comment published in the *Baltimore Sun* on November 4, “there’s a genuine arrogance on the part of the corporations, and we’re about to enter into a really adversarial relationship.”

The entertainment giants that make up the AMPTP are attempting to undermine the possible walk-out by encouraging strike-breaking and sending out information bulletins to non-WGA employees about how to cross picket lines.

ABC, owned by the notoriously anti-union Disney Studios, issued a memorandum to its writers, dated October 30, on how they could become scabs without facing any penalties.

According to *EW.com*’s Lynette Rice, the memo “instructs members of the Writers Guild of America on how they can cross the picket lines without fear of fines and/or retribution. Along with educating writers on federal laws guaranteeing their right to work during a strike, the memo...says writers can ‘resign their membership’ before crossing a picket line and yet still be entitled to all the same benefits under the WGA Minimum Basic Agreement.”

When a reporter asked the network about this memo, a spokesman replied: “In response to numerous inquiries by production employees of ABC Studios about whether they could continue to work during a strike, we provided them information about their legal rights. The law protects both the right to work as well as the right to strike. We thought it fair that employees be fully informed when making this personal decision.”

One writer told the WWSW that he had no idea all these years that “ABC-TV and Disney cared so much for us. It comes as a complete surprise. Ha, ha!”

On October 31, Warner Bros. sent out a memo to its employees informing them that “all employees are expected to report to work during the dispute,” “union-represented employees who choose to observe the picket line may be replaced,” and “management employees are required to come to work” because “we have an obligation to our shareholders,

clients, and employees to continue operating to the extent possible.”

The WGA strike has garnered the support of many of Hollywood’s top entertainers. Late-night talk show hosts Jon Stewart and David Letterman, whose shows will be directly affected by the strike, have expressed their support for the writers. Numerous Hollywood producers have also come out in support, in part because many of them are writers. Various Hollywood personalities are expected to join the strikers on the picket lines tomorrow.

The writers confront a major struggle. Not least of all because of past betrayals by the WGA itself. The current situation facing writers in regard to DVD and new media residuals is a direct consequence of the 1985 agreement and deals worked out by the WGA leadership in the aftermath of the 1988 strike and again during contract negotiations in 2001.

In 1988, after writers walked the picket lines for almost 6 months, the membership was sent back to work with a contract that differed little from the one they were initially offered. This contract firmly established the current paltry home video and DVD residuals formula. Then, in 2001, despite widespread opposition from the membership to the AMPTP and the avarice of the corporations, the WGA leadership again caved, in particular by refusing to fight for residuals in new media, an issue whose implications were clear six years ago and which was already being discussed in the bargaining process.

The larger issue facing writers, and all of those in the film and television industry, is the domination of the entertainment industry by huge conglomerates, which promote and defend the political and social status quo. The aim of these conglomerates is not to elevate human experience, much less to encourage a critical and probing analysis of social reality, but rather to make a profit at all costs and protect their own position and that of the economic and political elite to which they are tied.



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