

Writers' strike in its second day

More strikers speak with the WSWs

David Walsh in Los Angeles
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On the second day of the film and television writers' strike, its impact extended to a number of television programs. In addition to the replacement of the live late-night talk shows by repeats, networks announced a number of schedule changes.

ABC reported that one of its new programs slated to debut November 27 ("Cashmere Mafia") was being held indefinitely. Production on "Desperate Housewives" will shut down for the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, "Til Death" and "Back to You" on Fox have stopped production, along with "The Big Bang Theory," "Notes from the Underbelly" and "Two and a Half Men" at Warner Brothers. According to the Hollywood media, a new NBC show, "Heroes: Origins," has also halted operations.

The popular program "The Office" is close to shutting down. Its show runner, Greg Daniels, told *TV Week* that lead performer Steve Carell supports the writers' strike. "We're trying to shut down 'The Office,'" Daniels said. "We have the star of our show and the entire writing staff behind us." None of the program's actors have apparently crossed the picket line.

Continuing expressions of support from prominent actors and others, including Jamie Lee Curtis and Alec Baldwin, have been forthcoming. Baldwin wrote: "As an actor who has worked in film and television since 1980, I have always been pretty clear about the fact that we are nowhere without the writers in our industry. And that goes beyond the scary concept of a world of unscripted reality TV. Television and film writers are responsible for some of the greatest literature in the history of our society."

In New York City, writers picketed at the Silvercup Studios in Long Island City, Queens. In the Los Angeles area, significant and enthusiastic picketing continued at all the television networks and film studios. Teamsters' drivers continue to respect the picket lines, according to strikers.

Notwithstanding the widespread support for the writers, the consequences of a union leadership dangerously unprepared for an all-out struggle with giant corporations emerge from a comment by Writers Guild of America West president Patric Verrone. He was addressing the decision by the WGA to drop its demand for increased residuals on DVD sales.

After acknowledging that the surrender on this issue had been "met with significant disappointment and even anger from many of our members," Verrone explained that this had been a "strategic" decision after the union had received "several back-channel assurances that, if DVDs were dropped, we would be able to make sufficient progress in new media so that a strike could be averted."

Verrone continued, "Unfortunately, the response we got was not as promised and management broke off talks before our new media proposals were seriously addressed. Our new comprehensive proposal (including the DVD removal) was presented in an off-the-record session: our new proposal was then rejected."

In other words, the union leadership was hoodwinked into abandoning one of its major demands, or engaged in wishful thinking. Writers and their supporters are doing battle with some of the largest, most ruthless corporations in the world. This is simply unserious, and puts the gains and sacrifices of the writers at risk. For many, residuals make up much of their income, whereas for the upper middle class layers in the guild hierarchy, a setback on this issue would merely be an inconvenience.

In a second day of speaking with writers on picket lines in Los Angeles and New York City, we attempted to deepen the conversations. Writers are understandably angry at the film and television studios' intransigence and concerned about their financial futures and those of their families. This is entirely legitimate. The companies' position is an assault on the living standards of the writers.

Nonetheless, as we argued in the WSWs statement last week on the writers' strike, the issues go beyond DVD residuals and the future of the Internet, as important as those questions are. We asked a number of writers, as artists, to consider the implications of the corporate stranglehold over culture and media in the US.

We first spoke to strikers at the Sunset Gower Studios in Hollywood, where the day before an irate motorist had run over and broken the leg of one of the strikers, writer Tom Johnson.

Linda Burstyn, a writer on "NCIS" on CBS, eyewitnessed the incident. She told us, "A car started pulling up into the driveway, and the guy in the car started screaming at the picket line, and said, 'Get the 'F' out of the way,' and then gunned the car without giving him a chance to get out of the way. The only reason he didn't run over his whole body is that the other picketers stopped the car. Then the guy tried to drive away and the picketers stopped him from doing that. Eventually the security guards arrived, and he went back to work! Our guy went to the hospital."

"The aggressiveness and hostility in this is like how the studios are treating us. They treat us like people they can run down and, in fact, we are making them rich. Not only do they not want to give us a penny, if we accept their proposal, the business as we know it will be destroyed, writers will not be able to make a living wage. All content will be coming across your computer wire. We have no contract for that. The moguls can pay us nothing, or they can pay us minimum wage."

"This is the story of what's happening in America. We didn't write this story, we are now characters in this story. The people who are making tens of millions, who are a handful, want to make more, and they want to squeeze the middle class worker. No benefits, with subsistence wages."

"One of the veteran writers on my staff, he's been through various strikes, said, 'In the old days, we used to picket in front of Warner Brothers, and Jack Warner drove onto the lot, and this was a guy who you knew wanted to make movies. Ultimately, we were in the same business.' We are now negotiating with people for whom we are a small pawn on a big chessboard, major international conglomerates who look at us as a piece of a profit puzzle. For us, it is the cultural heritage of our country. Can you make a living as a writer? They want to say, no. We have no

choice but to fight for all writers, and all workers.”

Striker Jim Earl, who wrote for “The Daily Show” and now works on “Talkshow with Spike Feresten,” had a near altercation with another man in a car at the same entrance to the Sunset Gower Studios, who threatened to get out of his vehicle and attack him. But Earl said, “I didn’t want to fight.” The same individual had threatened strikers the day before with his car.

Earl told the WWSWS, “I think if the Writers Guild goes down, which is what they want to do, they want to bust the unions, the directors, SAG [Screen Actors Guild], then AFTRA [American Federation of Television and Radio Artists], the Teamsters. This is Bush’s dream for the last 10 years. Turn this country into a place of indentured servitude. A country full of peons.

“This situation, where a handful of companies dominates what we see, to me, it’s the definition of fascism. It’s like a handful of companies dominating the government, which is steadfastly on its way. If the corporations control the media, and they control the government, it’s horrendously sad. I’d rather have the government control the media than the corporations at this point.”

We spoke to Eileen Myers, who writes for “Big Love” on HBO, about the implications of corporate dominance of culture in America.

“We are up against conglomerates, we’re not just up against a studio. We’re up against Viacom, General Electric. And I think this helps explain the media slant. They’re owned by these companies.

“I think the fact that six giant companies control media and entertainment is a huge problem. More and more, I think the art becomes homogenized. Ultimately, they want a fantasy to be reflected. That happens very often, and writers struggle with the bargain they have to make in Hollywood. You get a lot of notes, things lose their ‘edge,’ for lack of a better word, or their reality really. So I think this is something important, how our reality is presented and how our art gets controlled.

“No, I don’t think film and television does an adequate job in reflecting reality in this country. I have to say I work for HBO and that’s a different model. They do let their writers do their work. But across the board, this isn’t what happens. They’re interested in appealing to as wide a demographic as possible, and to do that, they feel they have to make the programming as unthreatening and as milk-toast as possible, to not challenge anyone or make them think. They want their advertising dollars and they want to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.

“I think they infantilize the audiences. In fact, I think the programs with good writing do attract big audiences. I think ‘The Sopranos’ is great writing, I think ‘The Office’ is great writing, and they attract a huge audience.”

Another picketer at the Sunset Gower Studios, Bonnie Garvin, commented: “It’s ironic that the writers end up being the ones taking on the multinational corporations.

“I would happily take [CEO of DreamWorks Animation SKG] Jeffrey Katzenberg’s contract. You know what, I don’t even have to look at it. You know, it’s about the incredible greed of these people. They figure, everyone wants to be in the entertainment industry, so why do we have to pay these people, they should pay us! They don’t want to give up a penny. If they have a hundred billion and you have a penny, no, nothing.

“There is no appreciation for the people who are actually creating ‘the product.’ There’s no sense any more of people creating something and getting something for it. Jeffrey Katzenberg has never produced anything in his life. Why should he make more money than all these people who are putting him to work? He’d probably be selling clothes at Macy’s, if wasn’t for all these talented people.

“As an artist, you realize: I’m the one taking the risk, I’m the one getting out of bed in the morning, I’m the one whose life is on the line artistically. These people do nothing and they make all the money, it’s disgusting.

“These six companies control what you think, what you see, how you see it, I mean it is really, really scary. In this strike, how do you get your message across, when the media is controlled by the same people you’re opposing? People talk about freedom, freedom, freedom and democracy. I think people need to explore what those words mean. I don’t see so much freedom and democracy.”

A lively picket line marched up and down outside CBS Television City in Los Angeles. We spoke to Matt Gunn, a writer on “Real Time with Bill Maher.” He explained his view of the issues: “So what they’re saying by offering us zero percent of electronic sell-through, anything that has a commercial, what they’re saying is ‘We don’t pay you guys at all for your work,’ and they want to break the guild.

“Behind their intransigence? The motivation is no complex riddle, the motivation is corporate profits, and they want to get whatever they can.

“Let me tell you about the ‘\$200,000 a year writer.’ The ‘average’ writer in the guild doesn’t make \$200,000. It’s as if you took Shaquille O’Neal and Danny DeVito’s average height, it would be six foot two. So that’s just a numbers game.

“There are a lot of middle class writers. That’s why the residuals are so important. The guys who are making a ton of money can make their own deals. There are a lot of middle class writers, and some of them aren’t even middle class, they’re struggling at lower levels than that. If they don’t get those residuals, they may write one script every few years, they have nothing. That’s what we’re trying to keep alive. We’re trying to get those members what they deserve.

“There’s a pretty good range of people here. I’ve seen some recognizable people, high-profile names, who are making a lot of money, and many middle class people, who certainly aren’t living in mansions.

“Do we have an oligarchy? We’ve got six companies that run everything, that’s disturbing.

“We know what we’re up against. It’s a war of attrition. I think we’re pretty determined.”

On the same picket line, Mike Galvin told the WWSWS: “These are large corporations taking an inordinate amount of profits. We don’t want anything unusual, we come up with a lot of ideas that generate a lot of profit for the companies. We want our fair share. They want to take away as much as they can, they’re corporations, that’s what they do. They’re also trying to crush the union. Billions and billions of dollars in profits. They tell their shareholders how much they’re going to make in the future. And they turn to us, and say, ‘The Internet? It’s a just a fad! Nobody’s making any money off the Internet.’ The more they take now, the more they’re going to take in the future.

“The Chrysler contract is unbelievable. They sign this contract, and then they cut ten thousand jobs. Of course the auto industry is not making money. Our industry is making record profits, and they’re still trying to take back as much as they can.

“There’s been a feeling that we’ve been shafted in prior contracts. With this contract, we tried to redress the issues that we’ve felt slighted on in the past. We weren’t asking for large sums of money from these companies, and their response is, ‘No, we’re actually going to take away all the gains that you’ve made.’ The feeling is that since we’ve gotten these bad contracts the last few times, they assume we’ll cave again and sign another lousy contract again.

“We do worry that it’s going to be difficult for a lot of people outside Hollywood to understand our issues. It does seem a bunch of spoiled guys who want more money in what seems to be a very glamorous industry. We’ve got families like everybody else, and we feel that we should be paid commensurate to what we put into these companies. I think the corporations in general are way out of control.

“This conflict is going to have a big impact on other contracts coming

up in this town. Just like in the auto industry, the other companies are going to take as a model what GM managed to get the union to sign.

“A few years ago there were 11 companies, now there are six. The fewer there are, the more difficult it is to get stuff through, the less people there are making it, but there is the Internet. There’s the idea that you can get things out through other channels. A lot of that is up in the air. I personally think it’s ridiculous that someone can own every newspaper in an area, I think it’s harmful to democracy ... and certainly to workers.”

Outside Silvercup Studios in New York, the WSWS spoke to writer Jeremy Pikser. He said, “I’m hired by the studio to write films. I wrote a film called *Bulworth* about 10 years ago, and I have just written a film, a satire, about Iraq called *War Inc.*

“I believe the war in Iraq to be an expansion of US power and global dominance after the fall of the Soviet Union. They believe that they are now the only game in town. Indeed this might even be a quote by Dick Cheney. Politically we are back to a pre-World War I situation; however, currently the US dominates militarily.

“This strike is about the survival of the unions in the entertainment industry. The producers group, AMPTP, wants nonunion labor. They see an opening here because of the Internet. They can make shows and movies for the Internet without union writers, directors and actors. They can then put it in movie houses or television.

“Under the old contract they can use nonunion labor on the Internet, and they have already started to do that. This is because when we negotiated the old contract there was no Internet. We need to extend our jurisdiction to this new media. The producers can break the union because of the Internet.”



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