

At mass rally, Writers Guild leaders attempt to lull strikers to sleep

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Several thousand writers and their supporters converged on Fox Studios Friday on the fifth day of their strike against the film and television studios. The strikers, who altered their daily picketing routine to make a show of force outside Fox's headquarters in the Century City area of Los Angeles, demonstrated their determination to win legitimate payment for the use of their material on the Internet and other new media, along with other demands.

However, nothing emerged from the comments of the Rev. Jesse Jackson and various Writers Guild (WGA) leaders on the platform at the Fox rally that would be of the slightest use to the writers in their bitter dispute with the giant conglomerates that dominate the entertainment industry, including Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which owns Twentieth Century Fox.

For the most part, the writers, actors and others present were offered empty slogans and hollow phrases, or worse. The Democratic Party's Jackson told them that "too few control too much." He said, as he has been saying over the past 20 years as workers have seen their jobs and living standards undergo devastating attacks, that "the American dream is worth fighting for." He told the strikers "to keep hope alive."

Jackson is something of the Grim Reaper of the US labor movement. During the 1980s and early 1990s, he appeared on countless picket lines, encouraging illusions and helping the AFL-CIO bureaucracy to isolate and impose management's demands in strike after strike. His presence is one of the most serious warning signs that the writers' struggle is in danger.

Along the same lines, Writers Guild Of America, West President Patric Verrone referred to statements of support from the three leading candidates for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, Hillary

Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards, and a promise from California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to work for a resolution of the dispute.

The WGA's chief negotiator John Bowman appealed to the employers, organized in the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, "Let's put aside our differences and make each other rich. Let's stop this, negotiate and give writers a fair deal."

WGA West executive director David Young told the crowd of 3,500, "I want to tell you on Day 5—we're winning the strike. But our goal is to negotiate.... Suck it up, stick it out and we shall prevail."

Screen Actors Guild (SAG) President Alan Rosenberg declared, "Fair play doesn't pertain in bargaining. What matters there is leverage. Here is the leverage. Our leverage is that we're the product." He went on, "We took a bad deal on cable 25 years ago. We took a horrible deal for VHS 20 years ago. We won't be fooled again." The rally came to an end following comments from writer/producer Seth MacFarlane ("Family Guy") and a brief appearance by veteran producer Norman Lear.

The result of such a gathering, regardless of the conscious intentions of the WGA and SAG officials and the other participants, is to sow the illusion that all will be well if the writers simply continue on their present course, to encourage complacency and, generally, to lull the strikers to sleep.

The writers' walkout, along with the support it has received, expresses the growing resistance of the working population in the US to the relentless assault on jobs, benefits and living standards carried out by the corporate elite. The film and television studios, driven by the demands of large shareholders, no doubt envy the concessions being extracted in the auto and other manufacturing industries. 'Why should we continue to

pay exorbitant salaries,’ the studio executives reason, ‘when wage- and benefit-cutting is the order of the day everywhere else?’ The studios’ refusal to negotiate Internet residuals is, in effect, an attempt to reduce wages and living standards to the advantage of the companies’ profit margins and share prices.

To defeat this attack requires the full mobilization of the workforce in the entertainment industry, all of whom, in one way or another, will face this type of assault on their conditions of life. Writers, directors, actors, crew members, drivers and other staff face a common enemy and need a common strategy. Trade union tactics, even the most militant, will not beat back the assaults of the conglomerates. There are no easy answers or quick fixes. Film and television workers will have to consider and adopt a new political and social orientation.

As long as a handful of executives, with obscene incomes, determine the lives and fates of hundreds of thousands of workers in this industry, jobs and livelihoods will remain at risk. So, for that matter, will cultural life in the US.

A socialist strategy begins from the principle that there is no rational reason why Murdoch, Robert Iger of Disney, Barry Meyer of Warner Bros., Leslie Moonves of CBS and a few others should have godlike power over the writers and all the other film artists and workers. These massive organizations need to be run for the public good, under the control and management of those that create, produce and organize films and television programs.

Nothing could have been farther from the minds of the WGA and SAG officials who spoke at Friday’s rally. Hollywood unions are torn by jurisdictional and other petty rivalries and have been for decades. Their leaders often despise each other and secretly or not so secretly rejoice in the defeats suffered by other unions. In an industry whose central work, artistic representations of life, ought to elevate, amuse and educate a vast audience, the union leaders operate on the narrowest possible basis.

Critical questions face the working population, including its artistic community, questions of war and social inequality, the question as to how much longer the US will function as an even nominally ‘democratic’ nation. None of this is addressed by the so-called “labor movement” in Hollywood. The issue

of residual payments on DVDs and the Internet is a vital one, but the logic of the battle over this demand speaks to deeper questions.

The giant corporate dominance of the industry threatens to crush the life out of American entertainment and culture. Writers and everyone else in the film and television world will have to focus on ridding themselves of this enormous burden represented by the conglomerates.

The alliance of the unions with the Democratic Party, which ties workers to one of the conglomerates’ two major parties, lies at the heart of the problem. The promotion of Jackson and the would-be presidential candidates means that the unions accept the profit system and its political agents; such a policy makes impossible the pursuit to the end of the workers’ interests. As the bitter experiences of the American working class over the past 25 years demonstrate, such a policy leads to compromise, betrayal and defeat.



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