

Increasing bitterness in film and television writers strike

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The strike by some 12,000 film and television writers against the studios and networks organized in the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) began its second week November 12 with no talks planned and in an increasingly acrimonious atmosphere.

Variety noted Monday that “the level of hostility in Hollywood continues to grow. With hopes for resuming negotiations having cratered and TV skeins going dark, early layoffs have already hit the TV sector hard. But the pain will likely extend to other areas over the next month as companies use ‘force majeure’ clauses to negate term deals and reduce actors’ paychecks.”

The publication notes that even “back-channel efforts to jumpstart WGA negotiations have been largely halted.” The AMPTP “is demanding that the WGA institute a cooling-off period as a condition for re-starting talks; the WGA insists that the AMPTP respond more substantively to its most recent package.”

The strikers continue to receive widespread support from actors, directors, producers and others in the entertainment industry. The general public in the Los Angeles area, as polls have indicated, widely sympathizes with the writers.

Along these lines, *TV Week* noted Monday that 17 entertainment blogs would “go dark Tuesday, replacing their sites with WGA [Writers Guild of America] solidarity statements. ‘Some people thought we’d be against the writers because our favorite shows are going away, but we wanted to show that some things are more important than a few shows airing full season,’ says Glowly Box blogger Liz Pardue, who organized tomorrow’s ‘blog strike.’ ‘There needs to be an education effort made and we’re trying to do our part.’”

Similar expressions of support have come from tens of thousands of fans of various television programs who have signed a petition addressed to the companies. It reads: “We, the undersigned, fully support the strike of the Writers Guild of America, and agree with the WGA’s stated goals of obtaining just and fair compensation regarding revenues generated through ‘new media.’”

The isolation of the studio and network chiefs speaks to the larger social situation in the US, and globally: a tiny handful has enriched itself at the expense of the population at large over the past quarter-century.

TV Week observes, “In this regard, the networks and studios have thus far been at a disadvantage. The Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers has impressive executives in front of the microphones, but nobody who has come across as sympathetic or relatable. Statements by media moguls such as CBS President Leslie Moonves and News Corp. President Peter Chernin shrugging off the strike are also, in effect, shrugging off the concerns of their viewers.”

The support received by the writers has a social and political significance. However, it is not a justification for the slightest complacency on the part of the writers and those who back their struggle. The executives of the conglomerates are not in the business of being popular; their only concern is the financial bottom line of their companies and their share prices on Wall Street.

From this point of view, the hard line taken by the studio chiefs is only likely to boost their standing among large investors and big financial concerns, just as each massive job cut in the auto industry improves the share price of the auto giants. Imposing their demands on the writers, whatever the short-term cost in public relations, is the sole concern of the studios and networks.

Reinforcing its position, the AMPTP took out advertisements in the industry trade papers Monday claiming to ‘set the record straight.’ Adopting an imperious tone, the Alliance ad asserted, “As the WGA knows and its own records will attest, writers are paid residuals on permanent digital downloads. As the WGA knows and its own records will attest, writers are paid residuals on pay-per-view digital downloads.” The AMPTP claimed it had paid out a “record-breaking” sum in residuals in 2006. Hollywood book-keeping is notorious for its inventiveness.

In any event, the writers are merely demanding a percentage of future revenues from the Internet and other new media. The Writers Guild points out: “In areas like streaming video, despite the fact that it earns studios and networks significant advertising revenue, we get exactly nothing, because they claim its use is simply promotional. According to writer Greg Daniels, executive producer of ‘The Office,’ their show ‘has received seven million downloads. It generates the most traffic at NBC.com. We received a daytime Emmy for web episodes that no one was paid for.’

“By way of comparison, for the first three quarters of 2007, NBC Universal earned \$2.2 BILLION, 5 percent more than the profit it recorded in the same period a year ago. Over the same period, the overall profit of its parent company, General Electric, expanded 9 percent. GE’s revenues in the third quarter alone were \$42.5 BILLION.”

In an open letter to California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, written late last week: Jon Robin Baitz, playwright and creator-executive producer of ABC’s “Brothers & Sisters,” alleged that “there is a faction within AMPTP that wishes to break the guild or at very least, gore it, and wait this out, so as to cynically write off an entire season of unprofitable programming decisions and lay the way for future gains. In other words; to let the strike go on for months. The deeply insupportable position they have taken in adopting a blanket refusal to address the economics of new media with us is laughable. Even as

they insist to their stockholders that this revenue stream is the hope and reality of their future. To insist on two entirely contradictory positions is either morally bankrupt, or simply profoundly amateurish.”

Baitz may well be right about the motives of this faction within the AMPTP, but the writers’ cause will not be advanced by appeals to the governor of California, or reliance on hollow statements from the Democratic Party candidates. Big political and social issues are involved in this conflict. Cultural life in America is at the mercy of giant conglomerates with intimate ties to both major parties. That can only be addressed by the development of a politically independent and socialist-minded working class movement.

WSWS reporters spoke to writers and their supporters at two locations in the Los Angeles area Monday, Sony Pictures Studio in Culver City and Universal Studios in Universal City.

Outside Sony, Paulie de Cocco III, a Teamster driver, told our reporters, “The IBT international has supported this strike ever since it started. Without writers, they don’t have any words for people to speak. And without Teamsters, nothing moves. We’re supporting our WGA brothers and sisters in their contract fight. We just signed our contract a couple of months ago.”

A writer for “CSI: Miami” with over 20 years in film and television, commented, “I love this work. It’s my passion. I’m also sort of living out my dreams. The issues [in the strike] are noble and appropriate. There’s also a poignant human cost in how this work stoppage has affected ancillary businesses, and it’s very painful to watch that impact. But at the same time, this is a fight worthy of seeing to the end.

“Residuals and Internet forms are the revenue models for the future. These are the ways of doing business. The top tier gets everything, and the people who are doing the heavy lifting don’t get paid. All we want is some part of it within reason. I own a home, and I have a family. I’d like to continue providing for them.”

Krystal Houghton said, “This is my first strike, and I’ve been writing for two and a half years. I’m one of a team of ten writers for ‘CSI: Miami.’ This is my sixth year with the show because I had been an assistant before. It may be filming its last one right now.

“I think the biggest thing is the new media forms, Internet. Television is increasingly going to the web, and we don’t want to be left out. They’re trying to give us nothing, which is not fair.

“The expectation in this type of work is that you don’t work every year. It’s not steady work or income. When you’re not working for a company like Sony, you have to be writing to try to get your work sold. Also, when you’re not working, you have to pay for COBRA [health insurance] sometimes.

“We’ve been getting great support from other artists. Patricia Arquette and other actors have joined our pickets in Manhattan Beach and brought food.”

Raygan Henley said, “Ultimately when we craft a story, we try to build on very human issues. So if someone wants us to change something, if it’s minor, I could go along with it. You build a good story on big themes, on human themes—on accomplishment, revenge, etc.

“The writers are the employees, but they are also the creative force. A lot of people think it’s the producers and directors that create the film. But without the writers, the film doesn’t have a backbone.

“I was talking with one of the writers who has been around a while. In the old days Hollywood was run by one person, Lew Wasserman. When you negotiated, you dealt with him. Now we’re dealing with

six big corporations. When we negotiate, we’re facing an ugly chain of responsibility, a lot of bureaucracy and hierarchy.

“I see us all as creative people. I think the creative side deserves a share. We’re just like architects who create beautiful buildings. We are architects, artists, fine artists.”

The WSWS spoke to picketing writers and others at Universal Studios in Universal City. As at Sony, a number of strikers had brought their children on “Bring Your Kids Day,” organized by the Writers Guild.

Vince Cheung writes for “The Wizards of Waverly Place,” a Disney production. Judd Parkin works freelance. They spoke with us.

“This strike pits us against the conglomerates that run this industry. But we are like the oil company workers who control the wells and pumps. Without us there is no product,” Cheung told the WSWS. “The present period reminds me very much of the time when the Vietnam War was coming to an end. There were the same sorts of upheavals then. I definitely feel that our strike is part of a much larger social movement,” Cheung added. Parkin said that the strike would likely last at least until the end of the year. “We’ve shut down more productions than they anticipated. Soon our strike will be affecting ‘American Idol’ and ‘Dancing With Stars.’” Both strikers were critical about the coverage the strike has received in the media. “I’ve been watching the *New York Times* for coverage,” Parkin said, “and the stories have been buried on the inside pages. I saw picket signs today in the *Times*, but they turned out to be for the Broadway stagehands strike rather than the writers. This is all part of big business ganging up against those of us who work for a living.”

A writer on the television programs *Moonlighting* and *The Wonder Years* told the WSWS: “Michael Eisner talked about the greed of the writers. But he gets for his Christmas bonus more than most of us make after twenty years of writing.”

Maria, an elderly woman whose husband used to belong to the guild—he’s now deceased—told the WSWS: “Socialists? Then there’s a grand design that we have met. The writers need your support more than ever.

“This all has to do with social problems.

“My husband and I spent most of our lives writing. He has lots of credits, but in the end I don’t get any residuals or any pension or medical benefits.

“I’m here sick; if I fall I can break a bone, I am here because it is important, even if I don’t get anything out of it, because only through a strong union can I make a contribution to this business.

“I have a conservatoire for children. I want to create. I want to teach writers and their children how to write and make films in school.”



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