

Striking television writers discuss political issues with the WSWWS

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On Wednesday morning, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with writers and actors walking the picket lines at Disney and Warner Brothers studios in Burbank, California.

J.D. Mendonca, a young actor who recently moved to Los Angeles, had come out to offer his support for the writers.

"I moved out here a couple of weeks ago and I made a short of list of people that inspire me and that I'd like to work with—writers, actors, directors—and I was surprised to see that the majority of people on the list were writers," he said.

Like many of his colleagues, he anticipated that the strike would go on for some time.

"A lot of shows are going to be repeats in December and into January anyway because of the holiday season, and so I think that the possible pressure that would be there, if there was still a strike in late January, for example, isn't there right now," he commented.

Jeff Vlaming, who writes for "Reaper" on the CW network, felt there was a lot of solidarity within the Writers Guild and among Hollywood artists in general.

"Our numbers on the picket line haven't flagged at all. I know it's only the second week, but I think it's indicative of how much everyone in the Guild believes in what we're fighting for," said Vlaming.

Speaking about the number of film and television personalities who showed up yesterday on the picket line at Universal Studios to support the writers, he noted, "There was a big turnout of Screen Actors Guild members. They were walking along with us here yesterday too. They were at the huge rally at Fox last Friday. A lot of those were actors. The president of the Screen Actors Guild was at the podium and gave a rousing speech. So it's really great to have the solidarity of that union as well."

When asked about the major issues in the strike and the Writers Guild leadership's decision to pull the demand for greater compensation on DVD residuals, Vlaming appeared ruffled.

"That was somewhat of a surprise to me personally," he said, because "I didn't see that as an issue that was taken off the table lightly. Nor was it." He continued: "I think the important issue is this new media thing that no one can quite define and that the studios want to take three years to define. They're already making boat-loads of money off that, and so they make three more years of money—and then they're going to work this out with us and retroactively give us our fair share for the three years that we waited? I don't think so.

"If we give them three years to figure out what this new media is all about—well, right now they're fudging numbers they're presenting to us. Their numbers are going to be no less fudged in three years. It's not like three years of mass revenue is going to suddenly make them

honest. They're going to be the same duplicitous, money-grubbing, very greedy jerks that they are now in three years," commented Vlaming.

He went on to talk about how the domination of the industry by a handful of media conglomerates affects the economic and creative environment for writers.

"A lot of people compare this to the '88 strike. But it is a very different world than it was in 1988 because the entertainment companies weren't owned by giant corporations where the entertainment business was only one of their facets. Now, if that line of business is hurting, the corporation as a whole doesn't get affected.

"I think the corporations are not as prone to listen to what we feel are fair demands because they've got very deep pockets and they can wait it out. Creatively, it also dictates the product itself. Television—and we're all TV writers here—is going to tend to be less adventurous and creative, and it will be even more about getting key demographics to sell more advertising revenue—to create more revenue for the parent company, for the corporation that owns the TV network. This kind of corporate ownership of networks and studios tends to hobble creative output of writers, actors and directors.

"I currently write for 'Reaper,' which is on the CW network. It is hugely successful. Ratings-wise, CW is a small network, but we're maintaining an audience and we think that is the key to success. It's been hugely popular, from the *New York Times* all the way down. So you think you're OK if you can get behind that. But if it's not creating revenue, who knows what the future holds? Because that's the bottom line, unfortunately," said Vlaming.

This writer was also disillusioned by the official political establishment and the role of the Democrats. I asked him what he thought about the fact that the top three Democratic Party would-be presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards, issued statements expressing support for the writers, when they receive millions of dollars in campaign financing from the entertainment industry.

"That's a whole other conversation that could go on for hours," said Vlaming. "I mean, it's politics as usual in that you have to placate both sides. It would be so great if John Edwards or Barack Obama or Hillary showed up in LA and said, 'OK, I'm going to mediate this, as a senator. I know I'm running for president but I know this is important.'

"But they're not going to do that, I know, because they're on the campaign trail. In the meantime they support it [the strike], they say 'we're on the side of the striking writers,' but they also have to be cozy with the corporations. It's the same way with other issues, like health care. They say, 'This is my health care plan. We need health

care for the masses, but I will happily take this contribution from you, the pharmaceutical giants.' So it's hypocrisy and it's just unfortunate that it's part and parcel of politics. It doesn't seem to be any different as applied to our situation, our cause here."

Vlaming's fellow writer, the strike captain at one of the gates on the Disney studio lot, did not share his skepticism towards the Democrats. He was of the opinion that the posturing of Clinton, Obama, and Edwards was an expression of genuine support.

"I look at this unfortunately from one side and one side only, and that is the writers' side. And I don't know if you've noticed, but after the first day or two of the strike, our press coverage has gone way down. People in the press, the media companies, are owned by the same people that we're negotiating against and our story isn't getting out there.

"So the truth is that if people we can support turn around and support us in return, I think that's a wonderful thing.

"We buy into a lot of what the Democratic Party speaks for. I think a lot of artists do. I think it's just kind of our way. We're liberal. I think it's nice to see that after we give to them, they give back. I find it to be very positive because a lot of times in this cynical world you would think that a politician, even a Democratic one, wouldn't pick sides because it puts you out on a limb, because the producers are the ones with more money. If they speak up for the writers, which is really speaking up against the AMPTP [Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers], hopefully that says to the public that [the writers] must be saying something important, otherwise they wouldn't risk alienating the biggest money in Hollywood, which is what they're doing by standing at our side," he said.

Such a view fails to take into account the class character of the Democratic Party and the way it functions in American society. The Democrats represent one wing of the corporate elite; their specific role is to present themselves as the party of the 'average' man and woman and thus help prevent the emergence of a politically independent working class movement. The meaningless expressions of support for the writers from Clinton, Obama and Edwards illustrate that role perfectly. The presidential candidates make an empty 'populist' gesture, which costs them nothing, even as they continue to woo the Hollywood moguls who finance their campaigns. There is no sense in which they are going "out on a limb."

This strike captain, who described himself as a feature film writer, did think the aim of the AMPTP was to provoke the Writers Guild into a walk-out.

"If you look at the situation closely you can't help but come to the conclusion that they wanted us to strike. We could almost say that we got forced into striking," he said.

"And then you have to ask yourself why the corporations did this. I don't want to go out on a limb and I have my own theories, but they are only personal theories. But as things play out, there is going to be a lot of 'force majeure' [voiding contracts due to the strike] of people, not just writers, but I think there is going to be a lot of force majeure of people on the lot. And the AMPTP, which claims to represent these producers, is actually going to end up securing them getting thrown off the lot," he continued.

The strike captain began our conversation by placing emphasis on the DVD residuals question:

"What's not getting a lot of coverage, for example, is that the Writers Guild of Great Britain gets 5.6 percent of DVD revenue. We right now get 0.3 percent and we're asking for 0.6. We came to the table with very reasonable demands, I believe. We want nothing more

than to work out a reasonable deal with the producers, because they are our partners in filmmaking. They're the brains of business and we're the brains of the creative."

When I asked about the fact that the guild leadership pulled the DVD demand from the table, he defended the actions of the union.

"I understand that the future is new media. In 10 years I honestly believe that DVDs are going to go the way of VHS and eight-track. And that the future really is downloadable. The most important thing for us since the beginning of this strike, or since the beginning of the negotiations, has been the issue of downloads," he said.

"I do want to say that a lot of people seem to be upset about the DVD formula and offering to give that up. But I think it was a really bold and wonderful way of the Writers Guild trying to come to the table and say, 'Look, we're willing to move but unfortunately, we're unable to negotiate with ourselves,'" he continued.

There are also illusions among certain writers, who see the domination of the entertainment industry by the profit system as legitimate, about the intentions of the AMPTP.

One striker told the WWSW, "I don't necessarily think they're hostile. I think they're doing what they're paid to do and that's to get the greatest profit margin. These things are inevitable. They're not there to make people happy. They're there to make their business profitable. And so you can't necessarily fault them on that. But you do sometimes have to put a line in the sand and say, 'Hey dude, there are certain things you can't do.'

"The fact is that there are a lot of people that want to be in this business and [the studios] do put up the money for very expensive productions. And very expensive productions fail. And often times it's the fault of the writers and often times it's the fault of the studios. I hope there's a middle ground found so that they know that they need us and we know that we need them, and that something can happen where there is a nice place in the middle where we can all be happy. There are positives and negatives to everything."

The harsh reality that the entertainment conglomerates are predatory capitalist enterprises intent on rationalizing their industry, through slashing costs and creating a docile, 'flexible' work force, needs to be grasped by the striking writers and their supporters. Illusions on this score will prove fatal in the current conflict.

Out of this struggle must emerge a significant layer of film artists who consciously see themselves as socialists and direct their efforts toward the transformation of the giant companies into democratically-controlled, public enterprises.



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