Studios and striking writers to resume negotiations November 26

Rafael Azul
19 November 2007

The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and the Writers Guild of America (WGA) announced Friday that contract negotiations will resume November 26. Some 12,000 film and television writers have been on strike on the West and East coasts since November 5.

The agreement to resume talks followed a decision by AMPTP negotiators to drop their demand that the writers return to work as a precondition for new talks. A joint company-union statement released on November 16 said: “Leaders of the AMPTP and the WGA have mutually agreed to resume formal negotiations on November 26. No other details or press statements will be issued.”

Friday’s announcement was followed by an email from WGA President Patric Verrone to the WGA membership, commending them for their efforts on the picket lines. “A powerful strike means a short strike,” said Verrone, a phrase that suggests the union hopes a compromise deal may be close.

Since the walk-out began two weeks ago, the writers have received the support of actors, showrunners and other studio workers, many of whom joined the picket lines in Los Angeles and New York.

However, the studios have not shut down, and, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, at least one studio, Rupert Murdoch’s Fox, may be benefiting from the strike because one of its most successful shows—“American Idol”—does not use writers and will continue unaffected.

Previously, Verrone had declared that negotiations would resume once the AMPTP was ready to increase its offer on residual payments involving the distribution of writers’ material through the Internet and other “new media.” Negotiations broke down on November 4, the day before the strike began over compensation for DVD and new media sales. The WGA dropped the DVD demand on November 4, a move that angered many writers, to press for an agreement on the Internet. It is not clear from the announcement if the issue of increased DVD payments will be back on the table.

Meanwhile, the union has asked rank and file members to continue picketing. This week, made short by the Thanksgiving holiday, pickets will deploy on Monday and there will be a mass march along Hollywood Boulevard of strikers and their supporters in the film and television community on Tuesday. Normal picketing will resume on November 26, the day negotiations recommence.

The resumption of talks appears to be the result of so-called back channel efforts, informal negotiations mediated by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villarraigosa, Hollywood agents, producers and showrunners. According to an article in *LA Weekly*, the back channel mediations culminated in a meeting last week between Verrone, the WGA’s chief negotiator Dave Young, Walt Disney CEO Bob Iger and News Corp’s Peter Chernin at the home of a partner at the influential Creative Artists Agency, which led to the decision to resume formal negotiations.

It would be a mistake to interpret the resumption of talks as a sign that a settlement is at hand, Verrone’s words notwithstanding. The WGA was on strike for 22 weeks in 1988 and won next to nothing. Nearly 60,000 California supermarket strikers walked out for 19 weeks in 2003-04, before their union surrendered. Powerful political and corporate forces conspire with the union bureaucracies to isolate strikes and wear down the workers.

It is possible that the studios and networks are preparing to make slight concessions, fearing that there

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are considerable dangers in a radicalized and angered film and television work force. The strike has won widespread support; in a recent poll of television viewers, a mere 4 percent sided with the giant companies who dominate the entertainment industry, while two-thirds supported the writers. Some 20 network series have been cancelled and the strike has now resulted in the postponement of a major feature film, *Angels & Demons*, a prequel to *The Da Vinci Code*, starring Tom Hanks.

The networks and studios are continuing to take punitive actions in response to the writers' strike. The *New York Post* reported Saturday that NBC has fired "nearly the entire productive staff" of "Saturday Night Live." "SNL laid off all their staff until further notice. Their production staff, even long-term employees, were let go," a source told the *Post*, without any severance pay. The *Washington Post* reports that NBC might do the same to staff of "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and "Last Call With Carson Daly."

Deadlinehollywooddaily.com has revealed that the casts of "The Office," "30 Rock," "Bionic Woman" and "Battlestar Galactica," among others on NBC and the SciFi Channel, have been informed that their contracts have been suspended. Universal Media Studios has opted to exercise the force majeure clause in their Screen Actors Guild agreements. "Other studios have done the same: at Sony Pictures TV, the casts of Fox's 'Til Death' and CBS' 'Rules of Engagement' have been suspended, too."

In the face of this kind of ruthlessness, the strategy and outlook of the WGA leadership put the strike in serious danger. The union has sowed complacency, insisting that organizational efficiency and effective, law-abiding picketing would do the trick. Its orientation has been to the Democratic Party politicians and other union bureaucracies, none of whom has lifted a finger to assist or spread the strike. It should be recalled that strike after strike was isolated and defeated in the US during the 1980s and 1990s, despite high levels of militancy and the solidarity of other workers.

The political alliance of the WGA and other unions with the Democratic Party stands in the way of the development of a class struggle strategy that rests on the solidarity of workers across the US and internationally and the emergence of a socialist alternative.

The WSWS coverage continues to raise the broader questions in the strike, such as whose property are the writers' creations? Why should writers and other artists accept a pittance in return for their work from massive conglomerates whose only concern is the enrichment of their executives and shareholders? Who should make the creative decisions, the writers and artists or a privileged oligopoly, that handful of television and movie moguls whose only interest is the bottom line?

A discussion of those issues brings another question to the fore: who should run the film and television studios, a handful of CEOs or artists, writers and others committed to raising meaningful social and psychological issues and to elevating society's cultural level?

Whether the upcoming negotiations result in minor concessions by the studios and networks or a continuation of their hard line, these broader issues will continue to resonate. A new round of Hollywood's ideological and political wars has begun, and it will only grow wider and more bitter.

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