

Striking writers protest in Hollywood

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Some two thousand striking film and television writers and their supporters marched along historic Hollywood Boulevard Tuesday afternoon and rallied across from the famous Mann's Chinese Theatre. In addition to the writers, there were small contingents on hand from the Screen Actors Guild, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the California Nurses Association.

Absent from the protest were other important Los Angeles unions representing longshore workers, teachers, transit workers and state and municipal employees. Overall the turn-out was rather small; the union bureaucracies involved are not capable of mobilizing many of their own members, much less wider layers of the population.

Patric Verrone, president of the Writers Guild of America, West, introduced the speakers at the rally. They included Teamsters Local 399 Secretary-Treasurer Leo Reed, Chief WGA negotiator John Bowman and actress Sandra Oh, a leading performer on the popular medical drama "Grey's Anatomy."

None of the speakers addressed the central questions facing the writers, who are engaged in a bitter battle with massive conglomerates. While certain prominent television programs and a few films have been shut down, much production work continues and considerable legal and financial pressure is being brought to bear on show runners (executive producers/creators) to return to the job.

Although the strike enjoys overwhelming support within the film and television community and the population at large, the WGA is making no effort to spread the strike throughout the industry or take the writers' case to the people of Los Angeles and beyond. A handful of Teamster and SEIU bureaucrats do not represent the working class. On the contrary, an orientation to union officials and Democratic Party politicians guarantees the isolation of the writers on the picket lines.

The writers' strike raises major political and social issues. The film and television industry is not an incidental element of American society. To win their

legitimate demands, concerning residuals for DVD sales and the distribution of their material on the Internet and elsewhere, the writers will have to re-orient themselves to these big questions, above all, the need to take control of their work and film and television in general out of the hands of a few transnational companies who operate only in the interests of large shareholders. Such a strategy would bring them into direct conflict with the AFL-CIO and the Democrats.

The rally proceeded along an opposite trajectory, despite the occasional political point made against the employers and the sincerity of certain individuals.

Verrone briefly discussed the impact of the strike so far, which, he said, goes beyond the writers. "We are fighting for our future. This is an issue of the entire industry." He also said that the writers had "shut down a lot of television and shows and movies" and went on to list the support that the guild has received from other unions, including movie utility workers, cement masons, musicians, screen actors and radio and television employees. This "support" has been almost entirely verbal.

Teamsters Local 399 is the bargaining agent for 4,000 workers in the motion picture industry. "The studio executives do not care about playing fair, they only care when we kick their damn asses," said the local's secretary-treasurer Reed. "If they don't give you what you want, you take it, you take it," he repeated, with demagogic bravura.

The WGA's Bowman reminded his listeners of the growing income inequality that exists in the US today. "The middle class everywhere is under siege. Wealth is disproportionately flowing to the top wage earners. In this country the top 1 percent has seen its income grow by 43 percent, adjusted for inflation since 1979. Over the same period, the bottom 80 percent has seen its own income fall by 14 percent. An executive in our own business was recently fired and received \$82 million in severance pay. We, the 12,000 members of our guild, ask for a 3-year deal on the Internet spread among 7 companies to protect

our members in the future, something that would not cost much more than that executive severance package. They accused us of greed and they forced us to strike.”

Bowman, as is his wont, went on to make an appeal to the studios and executives to see reason. “I want to remind them [the media executives],” he said, “that our residuals have declined not only as a percentage of total budgets, but in absolute dollars as well. We are asking you, our corporate partners, to extend the terms of our agreement from the past into the future. You have not given us an economic argument why this should not happen. ... We are your partners and together we will conquer the Internet. Pay us and we will shut up and write. Show some soul and we will show some flexibility.” Finally, Bowman called for an end to the strike and a new contract by Christmas.

Sandra Oh expressed the support of actors for the strike and expressed her “outrage against the six media conglomerates” that make up the AMPTP. “Let the AMPTP know that we want to work, the writers want to write and as your employees we deserve to be dealt with and treated fairly ... I am appealing to the heads of these giant media conglomerates as individuals, as men, to treat the writers fairly. If the corporations make money from the new media, the writers should too.”

She reminded the AMPTP CEOs that they must share. “We are asking you to do the right thing,” she said. Finally she encouraged strikers to boycott products associated with the media oligopoly, such as Disneyland. “Let’s speak the language of dollars and exercise our consumer power.”

None of this provided a perspective for the writers or anyone else in attendance.

Support for writers

WSWS reporters spoke to some of the workers supporting the writers. Yvonne Petty, for example, is a member of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). She’s an in-home service worker also currently taking care of husband who had a bad accident. Yvonne has worked in health care since 1987.

Asked why it was important that other workers came out to support the writers, Yvonne responded, “Because I think that we all have to support each other. You know when times are like this, we all need to bond together, because there’s more power in numbers.”

Yvonne recounted some of the recent attacks on health care workers that have taken place in California.

“I live in Fontana but the main union hall is in San Bernardino and it [the union] didn’t come about until

2001 and we made a lot of progress. Every time since [Gov. Arnold] Schwarzenegger got in office, he tried to take the residual program away and we had to go to Sacramento and fight for that and then he wanted to freeze our wages and then he had all those propositions and every one of them we fought and we won, thank God. I wouldn’t be standing here now. That’s why it’s important.”

Yvonne hadn’t known any writers before, but, “Well, I’ve met a few down here. They supported us too, when we were out on strike and everything, you know they were out there at different functions.”

Rob Johnson is a member of SEIU United Health Workers (UHW). He works in hospitals and nursing homes, as well in home care. Our reporter asked Rob why he personally decided to support the writers.

“Any worker that’s getting treated unfairly reflects on us all, and so I think it’s important for all of us to stick together, especially in these contract fights. Because what happens to one happens to everybody.”

Asked if he saw any parallels in his industry with what’s happening with the writers and, in fact, in industry as a whole, Rob replied, “I think throughout you have the corporatization of health care, and I don’t know much about the writers, but I’m sure there’s a drive for less specialization and for more factory-type work, to put out product based on time rather than quality, based on profits versus quality, etc. I think that’s what’s happening in all industries. Certainly it’s happening in health care, I assume it’s happening here.”



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