

International support for striking US writers

Pickets in Los Angeles speak to WSWS

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On November 28, in an unprecedented action, writers in nine countries held demonstrations and rallies in support of striking film and television writers in the US.

In Berlin more than one hundred writers marched at the Brandenburg Gate. In Toronto and Montreal, hundreds of writers marched. Supporting writers also demonstrated in Paris, Amsterdam, London, Sydney, Auckland, Dublin, Madrid and Mexico.

The marches were heartfelt and reflected in their own way the fact that the struggle against the giant conglomerates is a global question and increasingly perceived to be so.

In one of numerous videos available online <http://www.youtube.com/writersdayofsupport>, a writer in Dublin explained: “We’re very proud to be supporting our American colleagues because they’re fighting not only about the four cents on the DVD or even residuals on new media, they’re fighting in order to put a value on their creativity, on their work and on the authorship of their stories. And they’re fighting to prevent the conglomerates negating that value, and they’re fighting to have just a share of the profits.... So fight the good fight!”

A writer in Paris remarked that he supported the American strikers “because basically the same issues are involved in the States as they are in Europe. The fight of the American writers is our fight too.”

Writers Guild members held their own international solidarity day event at NBC in Burbank, California. Quoted by the WGA web site, screenwriter and French native Jean-Yves Pitoun commented: “There were French demonstrations in support of the writers today in front of the Eiffel tower. Europeans are very carefully watching the writers, actors and directors in the US because Rupert Murdoch is everywhere. Our negotiations with him here will have consequences for writers in Europe.”

The International Affiliation of Writers Guilds (IAWG) issued the call for a day of solidarity at a meeting held in Montreal November 15. The Federation of Scriptwriters in Europe (FSE) declared that none of its members would undermine the US strike by carrying out any kind of “strikebreaking activity.”

Thursday morning a WSWS reporter spoke to picketing writers and supporters outside Paramount Studios in Los Angeles. The following conversation took place with television writer Susan Van Allen (“Everybody Loves Raymond”).

WSWS: Where do you see your struggle going at this point? We know that negotiations have resumed, however we don’t know much about them.

Susan Van Allen: There’s a press blackout, so we really don’t know.

WSWS: What are you hoping that your union will accomplish?

SVA: I hope it accomplishes getting everything that’s on that slate. In the beginning, there was a lot of press about unreasonable demands, but now the truth is out that it’s a very fair share of what we deserve as creative people.

WSWS: Obviously, you’re here for a very specific purpose, getting better treatment and more residuals, and rightly so. Do you think that the current system allows your personal creativity, for example, to express itself, or do you see that six large corporations controlling the scene has an impact on your creative freedom?

SVA: Oh, come on, absolutely it does. I came from a theatre background in San Francisco where you could do anything. When we come here, we realize that we’re in collaboration with these producers who have ideas about the marketplace which are not always true—especially when you see a show like *The Sopranos* break out and become a huge hit, after it was rejected for 10 years because it didn’t fit a certain mold.

On another thread, I also worked on *Everybody Loves Raymond* and that came out a time when *Seinfeld* was what everybody was trying to do, and they felt like it wasn’t cool enough, but then it becomes a mega hit. People related to the very small stories about family problems, and it’s universal, it plays all over the world.

WSWS: What do you make of the presence of the politicians? We have seen such figures as Jesse Jackson and John Edwards. Do you trust their solidarity or how do you see them?

SVA: I suppose I’m rather like Pollyanna in that I look at things optimistically. The more people that are behind us the better. Are they doing it for their own gain or do they really believe in it ...?

WSWS: That’s a very important question, by the way.

SVA: That’s a very important question.

WSWS: Because obviously you should know who your allies really are.

SVA: Right.

WSWS: What’s the nature of the two parties in America today?

SVA: I think they're so much the same, frankly. They are so much the same that it would good to do a switchover, but I don't think that would make things so much different. Are they really behind us? Well, I like what Jesse Jackson said about how we're fighting this imbalance of the corporations having so much and the middle class having less and less.

WSWS: Jackson is entirely implicated in this very system. And he talks about writers not 'losing hope,' which is pretty much what he said at his previous public appearance and the one before that. But what's the nature of their policies? You said that a switchover would be good, but the switchover occurred in November 2006 when the Democrats took back Congress on promises that they would withdraw troops from Iraq. How come they haven't yet?

SVA: Oh, can I answer that? Because they are all the same. Now, we know that, and we're in denial, but I think this strike will give us a lot of time to think about things like that and that's good. It will give writers a break to sit down and write about things that they really feel passionate about and come from a truthful place.

WSWS: Since you suggested this idea to me, if you were to write your next script on the basis of this experience, an experience shared with co-workers whose livelihoods are on the line, what do you think it would cast a light on? What truths would you reveal?

SVA: The truth would be rediscovering how much we are all the same and we're all coming from the same place as writers in wanting to write the truth, and so many times when we're involved in the business, instead there's a hierarchy. There are always going to be people who are more successful and that will automatically make a writer feel lousy.

But this is really about unity and that's what a lot of people are being inspired by. I love meeting people that are just starting out or others who wrote in the 1960s and fought in that strike. That's what I know I'm getting from it, and that's very helpful for a writer in that it's humbling in the best sense, that you have a place, and it doesn't matter who's making more or less money. If you can put that aside, and just get back to why you're doing it.

WSWS: I see two groups here, one large group, the group of people who work for a living, and then there is a small tiny group, that's basically trying to further abuse your labor for their personal accumulation or profit and we're talking about the studios and networks, the six large corporations. You were discussing unity among your coworkers. Do you see this as a broader class issue, in other words, are we looking at two classes?

SVA: I think definitely so, and it's something that's not acknowledged in the American System. We look at other cultures and see it very clearly, but we are very much in denial and pretend that we don't have that, but we do.

WSWS: You did see it, because obviously you're here and you're trying to counter the attacks of large corporations that want to take your labor and use it for free.

SVA: I'm also saying that it feels like the writers belong to a lot of different economic class levels, but there's a creative unity within the whole group that covers a lot of classes.

WSWS: Right, some of the writers might be luckier than others, and yet they don't have any control over how these residuals are

being disseminated. So that class line is above all the writers.

SVA: Right, that's true.

WSWS: Thanks so very much.

SVA: Thank you.

And here are the comments of Jeff Strauss, a prominent television writer-producer ("Reba," "Getting Personal" and numerous others), who explained his views to our reporter:

"From our standpoint, we have to keep letting them know that we are serious about what we are asking for, that what we are asking for is some level of fairness in the way we get compensated for what we do.

"The pie is only so big, so when you take pieces out to give to executives or shareholders, who all deserve some, you can't give those same pieces to other people who are participating in the process, so there's limits to that.

"I guess corporations are all oligarchies by their very nature. It is hard to say whether the creative opportunities that are afforded by the expansion of the number of television channels and the number of other outlets, Internet and straight to DVD, have offset some of the creative limitations.

"I think there's almost as much creative work being done in a broad base, it's just not being done by the major studios in the way that it was once; they are much more driven by success formulas and not by risk formulas, and so you are seeing less creative work done in many areas. But overall I think the quality of entertainment available is actually increasing in some ways when you consider YouTube or the Internet or things like that, it's currently in places that are out of our control.

"I think that at some level we live in a time where we are used to an old guard where too much power is being concentrated and too much money's being constipated at the top. I'm a person who does well financially and, you know, I do substantially better financially than my father did when he was raising me and yet I don't live a much dramatically more luxurious existence.

"Yes, I think there is a strong parallel to other workers' struggles and the more struggles that succeed against the giant conglomerates or industrial powers, the better that is for all workers and the more they fail, the worse it is for all workers. So, what we are out here talking about is fair pay for fair work, despite the fact that it may not be the screwing on of a bolt to put together a circuit board, or the cleaning of the streets, or running a train.

"We are people who sit down on computers and at pads, but the fight is the same. The fight is to make sure that some amount, some reasonable amount of compensation is paid, that the profits are shared with the people who actually produce the product and not just the corporations and the middlemen."



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