

Writers' strike reveals profound cultural and social divide

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Last Friday's walkout by the television and movie producers from negotiations with the Writers Guild of America (WGA) begins to reveal the profound social, political and cultural issues contained in the strike by film and television writers, now in its sixth week.

The strategy of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) is to isolate and demoralize the striking writers. To this end, it has revived the kind of political attacks that recall the old red-baiting campaigns of the 1950s. At the same time, the hiring of Democratic Party consultants by the AMPTP makes it clear that in this struggle the AMPTP is acting in concert with not only the business elite, but the entire political establishment.

The AMPTP broke off negotiations, charging WGA leaders with pursuing "an ideological agenda" that is at odds with the economic needs of their membership. Behind the calculated choice of words—which are ominous, given the history of bitter battles of Hollywood writers against political persecution and blacklisting in the 1930s and 1950s—is a transparent attempt to intimidate and divide the writers. Meanwhile, the producers pose as the true friends of writers, who are asked to join in a "new economic partnership" with the AMPTP that would dilute writers' present level of control over their work.

In this insidious campaign, the AMPTP counts on the help of sections of the media. This is exemplified by a *New York Times* article published on December 10, which refers to the writers' non-economic demands as part of a "writers' revolution" that, the paper warns, would result in a "radical shift in union power." These demands—the expansion of the closed shop, by bringing non-union "reality show" writers into the WGA, the right to honor another union's picket line, and the right to oversee intra company transactions that may affect

writers' wages—are elementary demands, without which the effect of strikes would be emasculated. Furthermore, were the writers to agree to a no-strike clause in their contract, they would be forced to cross picket lines of Screen Actors Guild (SAG) members in the event of a strike in 2008. Many SAG members have declined to cross writers' picket lines and support the strike. Those WGA officials that oppose that concession are condemned by the AMPTP as power-hungry "organizers" who put their own ideological interests ahead of the membership.

An important aspect of the AMPTP strategy is its relationship with the Democratic Party. It has hired a consulting company led by Chris Lehane, a well-known Democratic Party operative who was an adviser to the SAG during its last strike in 2002. Lehane began his career as part of a White House crisis-management team during the administration of President Bill Clinton; he has also worked as Al Gore's press secretary and John Kerry's communications director, as well as for Hillary Clinton in the current presidential race.

Lehane and Mark Fabiani, another former Clinton operative, now operate the consulting company in Los Angeles called Fabiani & Lehane. In addition to consulting for the AMPTP, the firm has also worked for other employer groups such as the Pacific Maritime Association, which represents West Coast shippers. Currently, Lehane is also the chairman of "Californians for Fair Election Reform," an organ of the California Democratic Party.

The consulting company also does work for the "Change to Win" faction of the trade union bureaucracy. Change to Win includes the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Teamsters Union, the Carpenters Union, the UNITE HERE union,

and the Farm Workers Union. In response to Lehane's employment by the AMPTP, the SEIU's Andy Stern announced that the SEIU Local 99 had terminated its relationship with Lehane and predicted that other Change to Win unions would quickly follow suit. Stern is reported to have said that Lehane's "days are numbered in the labor movement." He did not, however, offer any explanation of why Lehane was hired in the first place.

In fact, firms like Fabiani & Lehane are one of the links that connect the Democratic Party both with employers and labor bureaucrats. It is part of the corporatist relationship between labor and management that is peddled by Change to Win, the WGA, and all other unions.

Behind the Democrats' much-publicized and essentially meaningless gestures of solidarity with the WGA, such as politicians showing up on the writers' picket lines, Fabiani & Lehane represents the real face of the Democratic Party, as an enforcer of class relations and caretaker of the political and economic interests of the ruling class.

Ironically, Lehane describes Fabiani & Lehane as "liberal and progressive" and sees no contradiction between this claim and his participation in the combined efforts of the AMPTP, the press, and firms like his to demoralize and isolate the writers' strike.

AMPTP negotiators have made it clear that they are willing to shoulder large costs in this struggle, by sacrificing the fall 2008 TV season, refunding more than a billion dollars to advertisers—as a result of a dramatic drop in prime-time audiences since the strike began—and postponing the production of several movies. In some cases, as in NBC's "Philanthropist", a drama scheduled to appear in the fall of 2008, writers in Canada and Great Britain are being recruited to write at least 2 of the 13 projected episodes.

Beyond the immediate economic issues of the strike are much larger social and political questions. The media oligopolies, together with the rest of big business, are at the forefront of a campaign to change class relations in America and internationally. The attack on the writers is part of a multi-front assault on the working class and its living conditions.

An important part of that assault is the control of intellectual and artistic property and the dumbing-down of both education and culture.

An educated working class, able to connect to its history and to the legacy of human culture, is a threat to existence of capitalism, a system that is ever more dependent on the politics of militarization and brutalization. In contrast, socialist consciousness demands and depends on raising the cultural and intellectual level of the working class.

By their social role, writers exist on the dividing line between the cultural and artistic needs of the broad mass of working people and the profit interests of the media giants. Everything that writers stand for—art, innovation, refinement and creativity—is contrary to what these modern-day robber barons demand: standardization, militarization, vulgarity, appeals to the lowest common cultural denominator, predictability and cost-cutting. The defense of elementary rights becomes subversive to the ruling class.

In other words, six or seven companies, with near-monopoly control over movie making and television, are trying to propel the industry back to the conditions of the 1930s, when producers had almost total control over the work of writers. The WGA then was formed both to defend the writers' intellectual property and living standards and also to respond to the cultural needs of the population.

Implicit in the current strike, as it was in the creation of the WGA in 1933, is the wresting of control of television and control of screen and TV plays from the six media giants by society and the production of movies and television shows in the interest society as a whole.



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