

Impasse in writers' strike poses need for new political struggle

Andrea Peters
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The Writers Guild of America (WGA) filed a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) complaint on Thursday, December 13, charging the film and television studios with failing to bargain in good faith. This move has been portrayed by the WGA and sections of the media as an aggressive response to the intransigent position of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which walked out of negotiations with the union more than a week ago.

In reality, the NLRB filing, which is unlikely to come up for review any time soon, will have little effect. It will neither force the studios back to the bargaining table nor get them to relinquish their demand for what amounts to massive concessions from the writers.

On December 7, the AMPTP broke off talks with the WGA after insisting that the union pull six demands from the bargaining table. This was a calculated maneuver by the studios, which are determined to fundamentally change labor relations in Hollywood by denying writers, as well as actors and directors, any portion of the billions of dollars that they will be making over the course of the coming decades through the distribution of films and television over the Internet.

The AMPTP is intent upon clawing back concessions it made to writers previously, when it agreed to make minimal “residual” payments for the re-airing of films and television programs on networks and through the sale of DVDs and home video. Now that a new form of distribution—the Internet—is up for negotiation, the studios do not want to make the “mistake” of granting residuals to writers that they made in the past in other mediums.

If talks resume at any point, it may not be until after the New Year. The WGA announced on its web site this past weekend that picketing outside the studios would be cancelled from December 19 to January 7 due to the holidays. On Friday, the Directors Guild of America (DGA), which is also about to start contract negotiations with the AMPTP, said that it would postpone such talks until January. There has been speculation that negotiations between the DGA and the studios might undermine the bargaining position of the writers, if the directors come to a deal at odds with some of the demands of the WGA.

Coinciding with the breakdown of talks in early December, the AMPTP hired a public relations consulting firm with close ties to the Democratic Party, which has crafted the studios’ hard line approach in the press. As the WWSW noted in a recent article, under the instruction of this firm, the studios are now engaged in red-baiting tactics, accusing the union of being overly radical and motivated by an ideological agenda. The aim of this is to turn public opinion, which has been overwhelmingly supportive of the strike, against the WGA and to sow dissension and demoralization within the ranks of the writers.

The multibillion-dollar conglomerates that make up Hollywood’s entertainment industry are prepared to make significant sacrifices to secure their position. Over the course of the past week, various news stories have come out documenting the impact of the writers’ strike on the 2008 television season, with many shows shutting down and others expected to only have a partial run of episodes. Film production has also been affected, with numerous movie projects having been put on hold because of the need for script revisions.

The studios, which are already losing tens of millions of dollars due to the strike, are prepared to withstand more losses in order to break the resistance of the writers. Their aim is to set a precedent with the writers, in advance of upcoming negotiations with directors and with the 120,000-member Screen Actors Guild, thereby setting the stage for a major attack on wages and conditions for all film and television workers.

This strategy being pursued by the AMPTP demonstrates the need for a coordinated fight by every section of film and television workers to shut down Hollywood and the television industry. What is required, however, is not merely more militant trade union action, but rather the mounting of an independent political struggle to defend and advance the position of the writers and all workers.

The political questions that have arisen in this struggle go well beyond compensation for writers and other artists, as important as that is, and encompass the broader issue of the subordination of the entertainment industry, and popular art and culture as a whole, to the profit motive. To really challenge the movie studios means to challenge the socioeconomic system

that gives them the right to dictate to writers and the population as a whole all the various aspects of what is seen on television, in movie theaters, and now, on the Internet, around the world. Such a political perspective necessarily entails opposition to the Democratic Party, which the WGA hails as the friends of the writers, but in reality is deeply tied to the movie studios and the entire profit system of which the studios are a concentrated expression.

That the actions of the WGA leadership are not illuminated by such a perspective is part of what allows them to claim, either out of the conscious deception of the membership or self-delusion, that the NLRB filing is a real push back against the AMPTP.

The WWSWS went to pickets lines last week in both Hollywood and New York City and spoke to striking writers about these questions and other issues raised in the strike.

Last Tuesday, a large number of striking writers turned out at 9 a.m. outside the ABC studios in New York City. The picket line was timed to start as the “The View,” which is produced there goes on the air. “All My Children,” is also produced there. Michelle Patrick, a writer on this daytime serial, was on the picket line and spoke to the WWSWS. She stressed that she saw the ongoing struggle of the writers in a broader historical perspective.

“I’m furious,” she said. “I feel like we are living through the second Gilded Age. It is like the robber barons riding roughshod and unchecked over the working class. It is like the plutocracy’s exploits of the 1880s, and I expect to look up and see the Pinkertons.

“There are six corporations dominating the entertainment industry. The CEOs make \$50 million a year, and we can’t get a few cents. They won’t give us a couple of pennies, but they go on Charlie Rose and say they have a gold mine in the Internet.

“They are unchecked because of the government. It is like in the post-Civil War period. During the era of Reconstruction, progress was being made. Schools were set up in the South for the freed slaves. This began public education for people in the North. Then came the post-Reconstruction period, and all the progressive steps and laws were withdrawn. Jim Crow was started up again.

“The same thing happened in the 1960s. It was a period of progress. Civil rights were introduced in the North. This began an attack. All of the progress of the ’60s was dismantled starting with Ronald Reagan. I am furious because they are trying to drive us backward.”

On Thursday, the WWSWS spoke to striking writers and their supporters at Paramount Studios in Hollywood about the strike.

Babette Buster, a professor of screenwriting at USC, was on the Paramount picket line and spoke about the recent breakdown in negotiations.

“I’m not at all surprised at the actions of the producers,” she said. “It’s in the interests of the producers and the studios to

not negotiate. They will be ruthless and hardnosed to the very end.”

“I heard one person say, ‘Oh, they want to be heroes and end this before Christmas,’ and I thought, is he crazy? It’s in their interest to make people suffer and drag it out until February and beyond,” she added.

Babette agreed that the studios are prepared to make major sacrifices in order to drive down wages and destroy the conditions for not only writers, but actors, directors and all those who work in the industry. “But,” she added, “I actually believe that artists will eventually find another way. They’ll figure out the Internet, they’ll figure it all out. We’ll figure out distribution, and the audience will go where the quality is.”

In the past several weeks, there has been increasing talk among writers about challenging the movie studios by producing and distributing their own work over the Internet, with video-sharing web sites like YouTube offering new opportunities. The desire of writers to independently take advantage of these new mediums is understandable, given the far more democratic means of distribution that they offer compared to what exists in Hollywood today.

Clearly, however, such self-production efforts on the Internet, in and of themselves, cannot break the stranglehold exercised by the enormously powerful, multibillion-dollar corporations that control the largest financial and most advanced technological resources for creating film and television.

The WWSWS also spoke to Jack Rodden, a Teamster from Seattle, who came down with his family to the Paramount picket line to support the writers.

“We’re supporters of the union; it’s basic solidarity,” he said. “We all do this together. One union is just as good as the other, whether you’re a Teamster or work for some little grocery store down the road. It’s all union, we all got to stick together. That’s what makes it work.”

Expressing a sentiment frequently encountered on the pickets lines, Rodden added:

“Some guy sits up there. He makes \$100 million a year and flies all over the world. And the working guy can’t buy a decent house or have a decent car. I don’t drive no Mercedes around, no \$100,000 car. If I’m making money for you, you can give me back a little of that money!”



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