The politicization of the writers' struggle: the New York Times and an interview with striker David Wyatt

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The fourth week of the film and television writers' strike drew to a close with an insulting offer from the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and its initial rejection by the Writers Guild of America (WGA). The proposal makes clear that the big corporations are determined to quash the writers' legitimate requests and create a precedent for upcoming struggles, possibly against actors and directors as their contracts expire in the next six months.

The AMPTP's "massive rollback," as the WGA termed it, is a warning that persistence on the picket lines will not be sufficient to counter the current attacks on the living standards of creative workers. The strike must be spread and expanded, and directed toward the entire working population.

The studios and networks have the backing of the entire media and political establishment, the hypocritical comments and appearances of certain Democratic Party politicians notwithstanding.

An insidious article in the *New York Times* December 1 ("Both Sides in Writers' Strike See New-Media Future at Stake") by Michael Cieply conveys the real feelings of the liberal elite. The piece notes disapprovingly that on Thursday striking writers "angrily rejected an elaborate package of new proposals from their employers just hours after it was presented." This 'elaborate package' amounted to the studios and networks' staking a claim on nearly everything to come out of the new media.

"Executives at the country's largest entertainment conglomerates" obviously have Cieply's ear, because on Friday, he notes, they "were privately expressing shock that negotiators for the Writers Guild of America West and the Writers Guild of America East had dismissed without discussion the first phase of what the companies called a New Economic Partnership."

Cieply asserts later in the piece that the studio executives "described their cause as a necessary struggle against union-imposed pay structures and restrictions that, if accepted, would keep their companies from operating effectively in a rowdy Internet world that has already badly damaged the music and news industries.

"'I won't participate in writing the death sentence for this industry,' said one senior executive, who declined to be identified to avoid making his company a target of writers."

The *Times* article, which goes on to suggest that television showrunners are returning to work in droves and that "company executives privately said they expected to put their full proposal directly into the hands of guild members, so they would not be reliant on their leaders' interpretation," is one indication of the nervousness of the ruling elite about the writers' strike.

A few hours before the AMPTP presented its proposal and the news blackout was lifted, this reporter interviewed writer-producer David Wyatt ("Whoopi," "Sister, Sister") on the Paramount Studios picket line in Los Angeles about the major issues in the strike.

WSWS: There's been a news blackout on the negotiations. What do you know about what's going on?

David Wyatt: When the news blackout started, it was initiated by the studios. I think part of that is because the studio industry is losing the PR battle, and the best way to not lose it is to prevent anything from coming out. Every time they would present a deal, and it was a horrible deal, it would get reported to us and it would make them look bad. Now they don't want any news coming out; it's almost like if they're talking it makes them look good, but they could be throwing chairs in the room and we wouldn't know it.

WSWS: Ultimately, where do you think these negotiations will lead? What is the main objective of the struggle that is going on?

DW: Right now it's really about jurisdiction and pay. One of the things we're asking for is an increase in residuals in new media, DVDs and stuff like that. Over the years, when they would rerun a program the writers would get the residuals for each episode they wrote, and the directors and the actors, too.

Residual money was 30 to 40 percent of a lot of writers' income, because writers and directors don't work all the time; there are long periods when you don't, and that would help you get through those times, and for everyone else it went into their health and pension.

Over the years—and I've been writing for more than 12 years—I've seen the residual checks get smaller and smaller, because they pay less when they rerun material on cable than they do on broadcast television. But they own all the cable channels, so now instead of rerunning stuff on broadcast television they rerun it on cable, so in the end the income levels have been going down and down across the board, while their profits have been getting higher and higher.

WSWS: What do you think are the implications when the six conglomerates that you're fighting own and control the entertainment industry and therefore your creative opportunities?

DW: I think it's a detriment to the entertainment community. If you go back 20 years in Hollywood, you didn't have GE owning an entertainment company. There's this huge disconnect and you're just a worker—how important are the writers, directors and actors? That's basically the whole ball game right there; it's like a sports team and you pay the players. It's as though they don't want to pay the players, but at the same time the companies want to get paid for stuff they use on the Internet.

WSWS: What if the very people who actually contribute with their labor, in your case the writers who contribute to entertainment and artistic products, democratically controlled the industry?

DW: When we were having our union meeting right before we went on

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strike that was one of the questions someone asked the head of the union. What if we were to create our own product? And the head of the guild said that might be one of the things that happens because of this [struggle]. The very thing that they're afraid of could be the result of this. Even right now if you go on YouTube you can see a lot of creative videos the writers have come up with and a lot of artists have participated in.

WSWS: Could it be that the future of arts and artistic endeavors is in more intelligent content? Could it be that the artist is going to create products that elevate the consciousness of the audience?

DW: Whenever corporations take over the arts it's about mass consumption and you start to dumb it down. But at the same time there's a lot of stuff that's very intelligent, the stuff you don't really get because the corporations say not enough people will like it, not enough money can be made.

WSWS: Do you think that the executives of these companies are truly disconnected from the reality in which the majority of us live?

DW: I think so; it's almost like a huge machine processing the same thing over and over again and looking at "what makes the most money for me," and it may not be because people enjoyed it. It may be because the budget was low enough so you made some profit out of it and that's what's driving you.

WSWS: If the arts are driven by a need for profit accumulation by these large corporations we risk contaminating, if not compromising completely, the content of artistic endeavors.

DW: It seems like the Internet has probably slowed that process down. We've seen a lot of the bigger talents doing stuff on the Internet.

WSWS: What if the large corporations will see that as an opportunity to make profit and turn it into a situation that is similar to today? Maybe five years from now they will have taken control over Internet production.

DW: Well, I think the thing with the Internet is that it's really hard to control and manage and I think that's their fear. It just keeps getting bigger and bigger. And I think that's what's throwing them off, but they are in the perfect position to make lots of money off the Internet. I still think they would be the biggest players on the Internet just because they have this huge market on television. But I think they're uncomfortable with something they cannot completely control.

They're saying, "Oh, we're making lots of money and we're going to keep it that way and not share what's going to come in the future." But in the end you have to look at your workforce.

I have a friend who was a banker at Morgan Stanley. He was telling me he doesn't really understand why the studios act like investment banks, that they're entirely about making money.

WSWS: Those investment banks, such as Goldman-Sachs, Morgan Stanley, Merrill Lynch, are hurting.

DW: And they were probably making too many loans they shouldn't have made. They probably made bad loans in the name of making too much money, so they probably got too greedy.

WSWS: Some can be called fraudulent. The financial institutions now are facing serious trouble that will have serious financial repercussions; some have already collapsed.

DW: A lot of that is because, in any business, if you let them do anything, they'll do anything. Which is why you need government regulation, I think there's been less and less government regulation, like banks are supposed to be regulated by the federal government, and I don't know how you go years and years making all these bad loans and no one's saying, "Hey, how come suddenly everybody can afford a home?"

Somebody should have said, "Hey, you can't do that," and it's almost as if they're so greedy they're committing suicide on themselves. And that's the way it is here, you're so greedy that the hand is feeding you. Because in the end it's not the corporations feeding the people, it's the people feeding the corporations. The workers are the ones who are making money for the corporation, but then you're going to go out and kill the worker. It doesn't seem to make sense, it almost like this short-term goal you have there.

WSWS: You are talking about a government that should regulate these processes, but what happens when it's the government that actually deregulates in the name of the 'free market'?

DW: It's almost like they're one and the same, it's like if you look at the war in Iraq and all the profiting from the war, it appears to be big business for the oil companies and everyone connected with the administration. It's kind of hard to see that as a coincidence.

WSWS: Now we know for sure it's not a coincidence.

DW: I think it's kind of a mystery to the average person, because we try to believe that it's not about oil. A lot of people at the beginning tried to believe that the Iraq war was really about the ideals of democracy and not really about oil, but you can look at other parts of the world where we could've done a lot of good with military help, like in stopping civil wars in Africa, in Sudan, it would've taken a minimum amount of our military to say: "Hey, stop fighting, because we have a military sitting here" and to bring in aid and stuff.

That wouldn't have cost that much money; there probably would have hardly been any deaths because we would have been overwhelming there. But we didn't choose that place because there was nothing there to get. There was nothing there to exploit from the land, if we are already getting it there is no need to go in there and help the people.

WSWS: Now all of a sudden the US finds the exploitation of Africa very appealing, creating competition among rival nations.

DW: There may be coups that go on when we decide, "Okay, we need the minerals in this country." You don't even negotiate a deal, you just stage a coup or something.

WSWS: Or you invade them.

DW: Or, yeah, invade and claim that ... it's hard to use communism as a reason now ... so now it would be terrorism. So they will always have a reason to invade somebody.

WSWS: It all points to a system that is incapable of satisfying the most basic human needs, and therefore looking to patch up this system is a thing of the past.

DW: It's almost as if there needs to be some sort of revolution that changes the whole mentality of people, especially people here in the United States. There was an article I read that was referring to what's been going on over the last eight years, how the Constitution has been basically shredded all for the sake of fighting terrorists.

We'll have wholesale changes in our Constitution, suddenly the freedoms you have will be gone, and you won't realize what took place. So right now we're literally giving up our freedoms, like some of the drastic changes that have taken place since 9/11.

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