

Writers' strike in fifth week: the political discussion continues

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Striking film and television writers were back on the picket line Monday as the fifth week of their strike against the studios and networks began. After a great deal of fanfare last week, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) came up with an offer November 29 that Writers Guild of America presidents Patric Verrone (West) and Michael Winship (East) termed “a massive rollback.”

On the crucial issue of residuals for Internet streaming of television shows, the AMPTP offered a flat fee of about \$250 for a *year's* reuse of an hourlong television episode. For theatrical features streamed over the Internet, the AMPTP offered no residuals at all.

The United Hollywood blog, a semi-official organ of the strikers, pointed out: “Shows like ‘Lost,’ for example...will supposedly be shown without a single rerun. The only reruns would be on the internet via streaming and downloads. That means that a writer, who would normally get anywhere from \$3,000 residual for a WGA-covered cable show to \$20,000 residual for a huge network hit, would get \$250 dollars instead when it was shown on the internet—and that would cover reruns for *a whole year*, no matter how many times it was seen. If that same episode was downloaded from iTunes for \$1.99, the writer would receive about .6 cents. As in, slightly more than half a penny.”

Similar proposals for made-for-Internet material reveal the contempt the AMPTP has for the workers who do the actual creative work in the entertainment industry.

The AMPTP was scheduled Tuesday to make the second part of its contract proposal.

For its part, the Writers Guild is apparently ready to accept a flat-fee formula for material reused over the Internet, a fee that would increase by tiers based on the number of times a program or film was viewed via streaming. When the number of views reaches a certain threshold, according to this plan, the compensation would rise into the next payment category.

Determination remains strong among the writers, despite the efforts of the employers and the media to demoralize and divide them. Strikers and their supporters continue to picket the major studios in the Los Angeles area. WSWS reporters went December 3 to Universal Studios to talk to picketers.

One of these was Eric Volkman, a writer recently returned from the Czech Republic. He was among a group of pickets at the Lot 5 entrance to Universal. We asked him, “Did you hear anything about the writers while you were in Europe?”

Volkman explained, “No, not while I was in Europe. I came back to New York, and that’s when I started to hear about these issues between the two sides, and that a strike was imminent.”

“So how long did it take you to choose sides?”

Volkman replied, “Oh, about four seconds.”

We asked him if he had read the latest proposal from the studios and networks. He said he had and that “It’s not enough. It’s obviously a token gesture.”

Asked about the contents of the proposal, Volkman said, “It was something like, they proposed a flat fee, a flat rate per year for Internet streaming, which is unacceptable and they know it’s unacceptable; that’s not the way writers get paid. That’s not the way residuals work.”

The WSWS asked him how he saw the strike going forward.

He responded, “I think all it’ll take is persistence and the continued support of all these other unions that are behind us. The support of the public, I mean, you can see it here in a very simple way, the cars driving by honking in support. It’s very widespread; almost everybody’s on our side. I think even the producers realize that now.”

“I think they’re just not being very smart about this. They don’t have shows without writers, and to really get into a tussle over what is obviously the right way to pay somebody—and has been the traditional way in this industry to pay people—it’s just not very intelligent.”

What about the solidarity of writers in Europe and Australia with the US film and television writers?

“I think it’s fantastic,” the writer explained. “And I think it shows you that this is always an issue and this is always a battle, and we have to do things like this whether you’re in Switzerland, or Japan or Germany or Mongolia or Los Angeles. We have to get on the picket line and you have to show and demonstrate that these sorts of proposals are unacceptable.”

A WSWS reporter asked Volkman about the implications of giant conglomerates controlling what writers and other artists produce.

He said he saw this problem “in a positive way,” adding, “I see us making other artists aware of the fact that we do have the power and we do have the potential to get a deal that’s fair. I mean, none of us are asking for millions and millions and millions of dollars. We’re asking for a few cents, on DVDs, for example, per screening or per show streamed on the Internet.”

The character of the Democratic Party and the claims made by leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination,

especially former Senator John Edwards, to support the strike remain contentious issues. The orientation of the Writers Guild, along with the rest of the trade union officialdom, toward the Democrats is the means by which the writers and other workers are tied to the present economic and political framework.

A successful strategy would involve expanding the strike throughout the entertainment industry, calling on support from the writers' genuine allies—the working population at large—and making the strike an element in a movement of social resistance to the relentless attacks on living standards, jobs, social programs and democratic rights.

When we asked Volkman whether the writers should solicit support from the Democrats or the working population in Los Angeles, he replied, "I'd choose both, actually. I mean, we're grateful for any support that anybody shows us, so I don't want to pick favorites. I think that anybody that's sensible, that's on our side, realizes that we're doing the right thing and we're asking for something entirely reasonable."

The problem is that the writers winning their legitimate demands and allying themselves with the Democrats are mutually exclusive. The Democrats are tied by a thousand strings to the Hollywood moguls, who are one of their chief sources of support. Edwards and the others posture as "friends" of the strike as long as it remains isolated and no efforts are made to spread the strike to actors, drivers and others. The "friends" would disappear at the first sign of a major confrontation between the film and television workforce as a whole and the giant companies.

We posed a final question to Erik Volkman: "Do you think that the producers will eventually cave in?" He told us, "Yes, yes. I think so. Just the fact that they're sitting down and talking, I view that positively. I think this means that they are at least at some level aware of the fact that they have to solve this problem."

Writer Dave Polsky spoke to WWSW reporters at Universal's main gate. We asked him as well about the European and other writers' demonstrations November 28.

"It's fantastic," Polsky said. "It's wonderful that writers in other countries are feeling solidarity with us even though they're not directly impacted by the issues, but certainly indirectly and spiritually impacted. I bet people feel that, and so they are willing to come out and sacrifice their time to physically show that on the picket lines in other countries."

The WWSW reporters suggested that for the writers to win their demands the strike had to go beyond its present limited dimensions. Polsky put in, "In a way, winning a strike is like winning a war; there aren't any real winners. For us to have our maximum impact, it certainly can help to feel solidarity with writers in other countries. ... Are you wondering what more can be done to organize with other countries?"

"Yes, other writers internationally."

Polsky continued: "I'm not sure. I'm not sure what additional leverage we would have with these corporations by having writers in other countries, though obviously the support is tremendously appreciated. I'm still not sure to what degree the corporations that we're dealing with are dependent on the services of writers in other countries."

The WWSW reporter commented that the studios and networks were parts of international corporations. "Time-Warner practically rules like a world empire...."

"Right, right," the writer responded. "You're saying, for example, that we could have writers in France boycotting French-language

Disney so that they're not making money in France. Is that happening at all?"

We commented that such a thing was not happening. We continued, noting that the strike was in its fifth week and the latest offer showed that the studios and networks were intent on forcing the writers back, and asked, "Do you think it's possible to really win this strike by depending on the politicians," or shouldn't the strikers turn toward the rest of the working population?

Polsky said, "Those are all great things. I just think that it's great to be addressing the strike on the political front, absolutely. But I think that it's going to be won on the business front, to the degree to which the studios understand that they have more to lose by trying to squeeze writers out than they have to gain. To me, that's the bottom line. I'm not sure political pressure brought to bear...that's certainly going to influence them, but what's going to really make or break it is when they think it's financially in their best interests to co-operate with the writers as opposed to try to squeeze the writers out. That's ultimately the only real question that matters to them."

"Our primary focus, I believe, has to be on affecting them on a business level, helping them understand that writers are entrepreneurial, that we can build a business from the Internet without them, using funding sources from Silicon Valley or from the hedge funds, so that we can start putting our own product, our own content out there without having to deal with the studios, which are essentially middle men."

"Ultimately, what's going to bring the studios around is their realizing that it makes more business sense for them to co-operate with the writers. It's more of a business question for them than a political question."

The business and political questions, however, are intimately connected. The giant firms may make this or that minor concession, but, in the end, their interests and the economic and creative interests of the writers and others in the film and television world are incompatible. Their ruthlessness in this conflict can't be explained in any other way. For these firms, engaged in cutthroat global competition, driving down the wages and living standards of writers, directors and actors is an economic imperative.

For workers in the film and television industry, a new strategy is necessary, based on a break with the Democrats and a socialist understanding of contemporary society, including the need to transform the massive companies into democratically organized and operated public services.



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