

US film studios and television networks announce layoffs and cutbacks

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In response to the film and television writers' strike, now in its twelfth week, Warner Bros. and ABC Studios are carrying out or preparing significant cutbacks.

Warner Bros., a unit of giant Time Warner, sent notices last week to approximately 1,000 television and film production workers warning that an unspecified number of layoffs would soon be announced.

ABC Studios has cancelled nearly two dozen production contracts, claiming *force majeure* (a clause in contracts covering events or circumstances beyond the control of one or both of the parties). According to the Hollywood newspaper *Variety*, this signifies a 25 percent reduction in ABC's roster.

All the major studios had previously suspended such production deals, but ABC (owned by Disney) was the first to take the drastic step of ending them. There are media reports that the network is using the strike as an opportunity to downsize operations and even get rid of the pilot season entirely.

These are aggressive moves by the entertainment conglomerates, designed to make workers at all levels of the entertainment industry suffer the consequences of the writers' walkout, which was provoked by the companies' intransigence. In addition to saving money, the companies clearly hope that these actions will undermine support for the strike.

News of the cuts comes on the heels of the cancellation of the Golden Globes Awards ceremony, which was shut down by the refusal of numerous high-profile actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), to cross the Writers Guild (WGA) picket lines.

This was a blow to the studios and networks, currently bracing for the possible cancellation of the airing of the Academy Awards ceremony. If no settlement is reached in the next several weeks, either on a general contract or a temporary agreement for the night of the awards ceremony, it is likely that many SAG members will support the writers' strike and refuse to attend.

Organizers of the Oscar ceremony claim they are intending to go ahead with the program, no matter what. Gil Cates, producer of the broadcast planned for February 24, told the Associated Press, "We are going to do it. I can't elaborate on how we're going to do it, because I don't want anybody to deal with the elaboration in a way that might impact its success." Significantly, Cates is also a chief negotiator for the Directors Guild of America (DGA), the outcome of whose negotiations with the studios and networks could undermine the writers' struggle.

There have been no talks since the AMPTP walked out of the negotiations December 7. On January 11, George Clooney announced that he would attempt to set up a "mediation panel" to bring the two sides back to the bargaining table and help them come to a deal. He is trying to enlist the support of Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg and former WGA head John Wells, who was accused by rank-and-file members of selling out the writers on the DVD residual issue.

Whatever Clooney's intentions, this kind of maneuver will be of no assistance to the writers. The stark reality is this: a number of massive corporations are determined to defeat the writers and send a message to every other worker in the industry. In the face of corporate ruthlessness, various efforts at conciliation and the tactical maneuvers of the WGA leadership have come to nothing.

The union has cut temporary deals with a number of smaller production companies, including David Letterman's Worldwide Pants Production, Tom Cruise's United Artists, and most recently, the firm owned by Harvey and Bob Weinstein.

These agreements have been presented by the WGA as victories and a sign of its reasonableness and ability to reach agreements—contrary to the claims of the AMPTP.

Such tactics will get the writers nowhere. Among the rank-and-file the effect has been to create tension, with some members angered over the fact that their colleagues are able to get back to work while they are still out on the picket lines. This can only serve to demoralize the strikers.

The pro-business *Los Angeles Times* pointed out in an editorial published on January 9 that the WGA's deals with smaller companies were undermining its efforts.

"The deals mean some small amounts of revenue are again flowing for, respectively, CBS and MGM. As a result, those organizations have incrementally less incentive to give in," opined the newspaper. "The guild's argument seems to be that the independent deals will be a Trojan horse to get the writers' demands inside the producers' camp. But the Trojan horse is a made-up story. It doesn't work in an actual fight," they continued.

The shutting down of "Oscar Night" would not be a small matter. The ceremony is second only to the Super Bowl in the millions of dollars in advertising revenue it generates. In addition, its cancellation would result in losses for the local economy estimated at \$130 million.

Moreover, the weeks of media hype in the lead-up to the Oscar ceremony, the endless pre- and post-event discussions of the

fashions being paraded on the red carpet and the general fawning over the wealth and glitz of Hollywood are things that the entertainment elite is loath to give up, particularly under conditions in which wide layers of the population are becoming disaffected with the present state of everyday affairs. The cancellation of the Academy Awards due to a conflict between writers and their employers would remind people of certain social realities.

The WGA leadership is presenting the possibility that the strike could force the cancellation of the Oscar ceremony as a sign of the union's strong position. Of course, such an eventuality would underscore the writers' indispensable role and the support for their cause within Hollywood. But to imagine that this would deliver a decisive blow is an illusion.

The writers are engaged in a struggle with powerful elements of the American ruling elite. The defense of the writers' interests demands nothing less than a stand against the companies and the entire socio-economic order of which they are a part. Such a struggle raises the need for a massive industry-wide mobilization, based on an appeal to all sections of Hollywood workers, to completely shut down the studios and networks and all their operations.

Most importantly, only a socialist outlook and strategy corresponds to the reality of the present situation. The conglomerates want to drive the majority of writers back to the conditions that existed prior to the formation of the Screen Writers Guild in the late 1930s, when writers were entirely at the mercy of their employers. Decent economic and cultural conditions depend on the transformation of the entertainment conglomerates into publicly-owned and democratically-run enterprises.

The WSWS spoke recently to writers and supporters both in New York City and the Los Angeles area.

At the picket line outside Viacom's headquarters in Times Square in New York City, screenwriter Steven Katz spoke about the overall issues in the strike: "The companies say that they don't know if they will make money on the Internet, and yet they tell their shareholders that this will be a lucrative market. Telling us that the new media is of questionable value is what they said about VCRs and DVDs, and they creamed us on that.

"It is clear that the Internet is the future. The issues around the new technologies that we are debating here will affect everybody. Eventually the computer and the television will no longer be two separate machines. They'll become united in one machine. This technology impacts on every employer and employee. The evolution of this technology is like the development of the assembly line was in the early 1900s. They pay residuals for movies and television, but now they are saying that they don't want to pay for residuals on the internet."

Greg Parker, a retired maintenance worker who came to express his solidarity at the Viacom rally, noted:

"I have been to a number of strike rallies. I see the writers as part of the entire labor movement. What affects them affects all workers. They should get more support. I don't know why my union or all the unions aren't on this picket line showing their solidarity. The unions could be here if they wanted to, but I guess they feel that this struggle is not their struggle."

On the other side of the continent, picketing outside CBS Radford Studios in Studio City, California, Doug Allen, a comedy writer, told the WSWS:

"I think the strike will be successful in the end. We've seen how much money the studios are losing by not broadcasting the Golden Globes and their usual awards broadcasts. It shows that we're hitting them."

Also at Radford Studios, picket captain Steve Skrovan spoke with the WSWS about the tactics of the other unions. He noted that the Directors Guild was entering into negotiations with the AMPTP and that the former had not come out in strong support of the writers, because the DGA leaders were trying to "cut their own deal. ... We're always afraid they're going to sell us out," he added.

About the possibility of expanding the strike throughout the industry, Skovran was skeptical, because he didn't believe that actors and others in Hollywood would breach their contracts in defense of the writers.

Instead, he described the WGA's tactic as follows: "It's a slow bleeding. There's no knock-out punch. I make the analogy—it's David versus Goliath but David is not going to bring Goliath to his knees, he just needs to bloody his nose a little bit."

The difficulty is that the writers are facing massive corporations whose determination is proven by the fact that that they have already lost hundreds of millions of dollars as a result of the strike and have made no move to return to the bargaining table.

Many striking writers do have a sense of some of the larger political and economic issues in the strike.

As Allen told us, "A lot of what we're seeing now, and not just in this industry, is the constant squeezing of the middle class. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer, so this is just part of that.

"I don't subscribe to either of the two parties, because I don't believe that there's a big enough difference between them, and the needs of the country can't be represented by just two parties. They fight each other for a power, and a three, four, or five-party system would be a nice change," he added.

Skrovan also expressed considerable skepticism about official politics. When the WSWS asked him about the intimate relationship between the public relations firm run by Mark Fabiani and Chris Lehane, hired by the AMPTP to smear the writers, and the Democratic Party, he replied, "If I can be blunt, they've obviously proven themselves to be whores. They've also worked for the 'Change to Win' unions. It just shows you the state of liberalism and progressivism in this country, where somebody like Hillary Clinton can be depicted as a wacko lefty, when she is to the right of Eisenhower."

He continued about the Democratic Party-connected public relations outfit, "They called us 'organizers.' God forbid people should organize! This is the term this supposedly progressive PR firm is using in the service of six or seven mega corporations."



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