Film and television writers' strike: picketing resumes and so does the political discussion

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Full-scale picketing resumed Monday in the strike by more than 10,000 film and television writers in the US, now in its third month.

The conflict is a complex and significant social event. Its principal immediate cause is the refusal of the giant media conglomerates to offer the writers decent compensation for their work that will be distributed over the Internet and other new media.

The studios and networks intend to appropriate the wealth created by these media for themselves, as they have done for the past 20 years in regard to DVDs (from whose sale the writers receive a pittance; they are estimated to have lost some $1.5 billion). The strike, however, is bound up with far more than this one issue, as legitimate as it is.

Whether the writers are conscious of it or not, their struggle is part of a growing movement by workers internationally against the relentless attacks on jobs, living standards and democratic rights. Over the past several months, various sections of the working population have engaged in efforts to drive back employers and governments: rail and other workers in France, train drivers in Germany, postal workers in Britain, auto workers in the US. In each case, the struggle has been betrayed by union bureaucracies tied to the existing political parties and social system.

The writers, as various polls indicate, have received wide support from other sections of workers in the entertainment industry and the population as a whole. Their anger toward the massive corporations that employ and exploit them has come together with widespread popular hostility. Increasingly, although they may not understand it consciously, Americans hate the capitalist order.

Whether it is the loss of a decent job, impossible conditions at work, rising prices, the threat of foreclosure or bankruptcy, the promise of endless war in Iraq and elsewhere, crumbling infrastructure, the elimination or slashing of social services and programs—US society is coming apart at the seams. None of the presidential candidates of the two big business parties is either willing or able to address these burning problems.

The writers have demonstrated determination and originality. They have picketed and marched on many occasions. They have brought major film and television stars to the picket lines. They have staged various "theme" protests. They have publicized and excoriated strike-breaking.

Exposed along the way have been the claims and pretensions of figures like Jon Stewart of "The Daily Show" and Jay Leno of "The Tonight Show." These extremely well-paid individuals have proven to be far more concerned with their own careers than anything else.

No doubt the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) has been taken aback by the degree of support the writers have received, the attitude of the showrunners (critical personnel in the production of television shows) and the willingness of the strikers to make sacrifices.

The strike has had a financial and social impact. A number of film projects have been postponed and the television season largely written off. The virtual cancellation of the Golden Globes award program, thanks in large measure to the solidarity of actors, is a blow to NBC. The Academy Awards ceremony itself is threatened.

However, it would be a fatal mistake to underestimate the ruthlessness of the media giants. They have enormous resources and connections to the two major parties. The Hollywood elite has intimate ties to the Democratic Party in particular, whom it significantly bankrolls.

Through their support for the Democrats, the trade unions, including the Writers Guild (WGA), subordinate the working class to the interests of big business.

The hiring of the publicity firm of Mark Fabiani and Chris Lehane by the AMPTP illustrates the relations between the writers, the conglomerates, the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

Fabiani and Lehane worked for Bill Clinton when he was in the White House, for Al Gore when he ran for president in 2000 and now work for Hillary Clinton.

The pair are being paid $100,000 a month to smear and discredit the strikers on behalf of Rupert Murdoch of News Corp, Robert Iger of Disney, Jeff Zucker of NBC, Leslie Moonves of CBS and the rest of the corporate sharks.

The *LA Weekly* notes that the writers strike, in part because of the role of Fabiani and Lehane, "will increasingly be linked to the approaching presidential primary." Because of their alliance with the Democratic Party, leaders of the California Labor Federation are "Already ... reluctant to slam Lehane and Fabiani for joining the studios."

The newspaper continues: "California Labor Federation chief Art Pulaski, for whom Lehane worked recently opposing [Gov. Arnold] Schwarzenegger's proposal to tax businesses and dramatically expand government-supported health care in California, says he's 'not sure' about future campaigns with the duo. "And state Labor Federation communications director Anastasia Ordonez says, 'It is a very unclear situation,' noting that, while Labor Federation members are picketing with the striking Hollywood writers, the Writers Guild is not exactly a member of the traditional labor circle, since it's not affiliated with the California Labor Federation. "Their caution is driven by the fact that presidential politics is about to hit California in a very big way. If Hillary Clinton does end up winning the Democratic presidential

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nomination—and California will play a key role in that outcome—and if the Clintons maintain their close ties to Lehane and Fabiani, many powerful labor types won't want to cross the Clintons' slick-talking PR allies."

No strike action alone can defeat this united front of the conglomerates, the Democrats and, when push comes to shove, the trade union bureaucracy.

The WGA's "divide and conquer" strategy of signing up smaller companies (David Letterman's Worldwide Pants, United Artists) will not have the desired effect. The guild leadership's view—"We expect this deal to encourage other companies, especially large employers, to seek and reach agreements with us," spelled out in a letter from East and West Coast WGA presidents Patric Verrone and Michael Winship—is self-delusion at best, deception at worst.

Even more futile is the letter-writing campaign organized by the WGA to put pressure on Peter Chernin, Fox's CEO and Murdoch's right-hand man. The guild is urging television fans to write pressing Chernin "to return to the negotiating table with the Writers Guild of America to settle this strike," and informing him, "I want to see new episodes of my favorite programs and this is not possible without the writers." Chernin, who earns tens of millions of dollars a year, answers to billionaire investors, not ordinary television viewers.

The writers strike raises fundamental questions about American society. Above all, are the needs and interests of the vast majority, who work for a wage, to remain at the mercy of a tiny, fantastically wealthy handful?

Much of what passes for entertainment in the US is miserable, incapable of amusing or educating. Television and film production controlled by vast profit-making apparatuses, in the end, means strangling creativity and preventing an honest appraisal of reality. Will that same handful of individuals, whose interest it is to conceal the real nature of American society, be permitted to go on determining what hundreds of millions see and hear on a daily basis?

A new period of global mass struggles is opening up, in which the critical question will be the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class on an internationalist and socialist basis. In the US, this means a decisive break with the two-party system, and all its representatives in the Democratic and Republic parties, and the building of a mass movement to break the stranglehold of the corporate oligarchy over every aspect of American life, economic, political and cultural.

On Tuesday WSWS reporters spoke to strikers and supporters outside Warner Bros. studios in Burbank, California.

Writer-producer Cynthia Riddle (*Corner of the Eye, The Uninvited, Crossroads: A Story of Forgiveness*) spoke about the implications of the writers' struggle coming in the midst of a growing economic crisis.

"I think the most important thing is that we're all in the same boat. There certainly are a lot more struggling working people in this country than there are CEOs. One of the CEOs that we're engaged in this epic struggle with made $35 million last year, and he got a raise this year to $84 million for, frankly, doing a poor job. His TV season was very uneventful; he had a lot of duds, not things that were good. He almost tripled his money to $84 million and I have to ask, what human being needs $84 million?

"And imagine how many workers who come to work and work hard in this country you could hire for $84 million! Unfortunately, what's going on right now is that there are a few people making ungodly amounts of money and all the rest of us are struggling. You know, my dad was a working person, my dad and mom were both middle class working people, but they always were able to make ends meet. I don't think today's people can. It's a situation where both your husband and you have to be working, but a lot of people are divorced and single and trying to support their kids. It's very, very hard. I hope that it changes."

We asked Riddle what social concerns she thought writers should have the freedom to address.

"There are lots of topics, I mean, some things are sellable and some aren't. Obviously, a lot of writers are going to come out of this strike very anti-corporate and anti-CEO, because that's what we've been dealing with. But I have the feeling that, unfortunately, at the end of the day, the people who distribute our product and put up the money to put out our product are those big conglomerates and those CEOs. So if you go in and try to sell them a story about their own greed, they're not going to buy it very quickly, OK? Certainly it's the topic foremost on my mind at the moment as I'm walking across the boulevard."

The WSWS also spoke to a Teamsters member, Jon Cosham, who explained: "I'm an aspiring writer. The Teamsters are behind the WGA, so they have a couple of us driving them. I'm a union guy through and through. I believe in the cause."

Cosham agreed that if the studios and networks could defeat the writers, they would then go after everybody else.

"I don't think that SAG [Screen Actors Guild] is going to allow that to happen. With the Golden Globe thing canceled, that's a blow there. And if you look at Warner Brothers' back lot, the trucks are all lined up; there's nobody working. So I think this is working, we've just got to stay the course, but I really do think that without SAG ... I don't know.

"I write TV dramas. I submitted something just as the strike began. The timing wasn't great. I have friends who are writers, I have a cousin that's an executive producer, and these guys here, we've all become friends. As a Teamster, I drive for the studios. I drive for the different shows and different movies. The other drivers are pretty much supportive."

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