

# Film and television writers plan “Strike TV” Internet programming

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More than 300 striking film and television writers gathered January 9 at the Writers Guild of America Theater in Beverly Hills to prepare for a February launching of “Strike TV,” a web site featuring original shows produced by WGA members to be streamed across the Internet.

According to the Strike TV “MySpace” page, funds raised by ad revenue will go toward the Writers Guild Foundation Industry Support Fund, assisting non-WGA members, including IATSE and Teamsters affected by the strike.”

The gathering had a highly contradictory character. On the one hand, it no doubt reflected the growing disgust of writers, and not only writers, with the absolute domination of the media and entertainment industry by massive corporations, as well as the desire for a genuine alternative. On the other hand, the meeting made clear that there are elements seeking to divert those sentiments into politically and socially harmless channels or even to profit handsomely from them.

Writer Ian Deitchman (“Life As We Know It”) explained that Strike TV would provide the opportunity for “WGA members to work for themselves, to generate revenue through advertising, to own their own material, and to be compensated through profit participation.” Stressing the importance that WGA members place on their creative works, Deitchman declared that on Strike TV, “Content will be king.”

Deitchman, however, also placed strict limits on the project, stating that the WGA plan was only for “the short-term goal of raising money,” and “not to establish a new business model,” i.e., not to challenge the hegemony of the media conglomerates. The studios and networks provoked the strike by refusing to offer the writers reasonable compensation for the use of their

shows on the Internet and other forms of “new media.”

The next speaker, director Peter Hyoguchi, described the impact of new technologies: “The two obstacles we always faced were the high costs of production and distribution. With affordable HD technology—a camera can be purchased for less than \$7,000, or even borrowed—and computer editing, shows can be produced for a fraction of the cost, and Internet distribution globally is free.”

While these technologies certainly open new avenues for entertainment production and distribution, it is not realistic to think that low-budget productions streamed on the Internet will replace major studio products and the communal experience of television and movie watching.

This point was underscored, perhaps inadvertently, by the next speaker, Kent Nichols, who over the last two years has established a lucrative web site for episodes of his creation, “Ask a Ninja,” a somewhat crude series of three-to-five minute episodes of humor aimed at young audiences.

One has only to view an episode on askaninja.com to appreciate that this form of entertainment does not pose any immediate threat to the conglomerates’ monopoly over regular television programming or feature films.

The panel discussion was oriented toward the writers developing their own abilities to exploit Internet technologies rather than confronting the issues raised by the strike. Ken Hayes, a self-styled “Internet entrepreneur,” not a screen writer, delivered a lengthy power-point presentation on how to “monetize”—that is generate advertising revenue—from Internet content.

Contradicting the other speakers, Hayes claimed that “traffic”—referring to the flow of individuals surfing the Internet—“is king, not content.” The point, according to Hayes, “is to own the traffic”—the attention of these

human beings—and sell it to advertisers. He spoke in reverential terms about people in their mid-20s making hundreds of millions of dollars a year by directing traffic to advertisers.

While no other speaker exhibited Hayes's crass commercialism, none mentioned using Strike TV programming to educate its audience on the broader issues raised by the writers strike.

Instead, the suggestion was made that Strike TV could be used to pressure the entertainment conglomerates into settling the strike. Aaron Mendelsohn, a WGA West Board Member presently on the negotiating committee, for example, asserted that exploiting the Internet, a concept he called "Hollywood 2.0," would help develop "a direct relationship between content creators and content consumers," and that would "help us get better terms from corporate media."

Certainly the production and distribution of original content outside of the media conglomerates to generate revenue supporting the continuation of the strike is to be supported. But the Strike TV discussion had an air of self-delusion about it, highlighted when the proposal to initiate the Internet broadcasts during February so they could compete with the networks during the important sweeps period generated laughter from the audience.

The striking writers find themselves part of a growing movement of workers internationally fighting back against deepening attacks on their standards of living. They must find a way to break with the parochial limitations of the WGA bureaucracy, and its subordination of the union to the Democratic Party, and to tap more powerfully into the widespread public support which exists for their strike. No matter how dedicated they are, these striking workers cannot prevail in isolation, without the broadest public and political counteroffensive against the hegemony large multi-national conglomerates exert over every aspect of our economic, political and cultural life.

This fundamental struggle cannot be avoided by setting up a web site to distribute short, low-budget productions in a sort of virtual commune. There is no purely trade union, technological or organizational solution to the writers' problems. Nor would it be advisable, if it were possible, simply to transfer the current content of television programming and films to a new medium. The generally low artistic quality of the

current fare is inseparable from its subordination to the corporate bottom line and acceptance of the status quo. Bound up with the struggle against the studios and networks is the need for a cultural revitalization.

The massive means of film production and distribution cannot merely be abandoned to their current owners, the wealthy parasites in the boardrooms. They will have to be freed from corporate control and transformed by their creators—the writers, actors and other workers—into genuine public services, dedicated to the interests of the population rather than the further enrichment of a few.

An open discussion, including the socialist viewpoint, of the big political and cultural questions facing the writers is a pressing issue.



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