

# A comment: What will be the impact of the writers' strike on the writers themselves?

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Film and television writers have been on strike since November 5. Their struggle with the giant studios and networks over the issue of decent compensation for material shown on the Internet and other new media is a bitter one.

The writers are entitled to what they are asking—in fact, they're entitled to far more. The film and television business is presided over by a layer of corporate parasites, whose role it is to decide what the US and global population should see and hear and to make certain that massive profits pour in uninterrupted to a handful of conglomerates. For fulfilling this regressive and philistine function, they receive enormous sums and live like royalty.

As Brecht once noted about some ruling stratum or other, 'Perhaps they have to be the way they are, but they do not have to be.'

A rational and socially progressive program for the writers strike would begin from the premise that the means of producing and distributing film, television and other media need to be removed from the viselike grip of GE, Time Warner, Disney, News Corp., Viacom and the rest and become publicly-owned and -operated facilities. Realizing such a goal is no easy matter. It requires a political break with the Democratic Party, a conscious identification with the struggles of the international working class and the building up of a socialist movement.

For their part, the studios and networks hope to defeat the writers and, once having decisively suppressed what they perceive as a threat to their omnipotence, see a return to normal. But how could that be? Things will never return to 'normal.' Humpty Dumpty can't be put back together again.

The writers are undergoing an important and eye-opening experience. The more successful are no doubt cushioned against economic hardship, but many writers are not. They are missing paychecks and walking picket lines. Bills and debts pile up. This of course can put pressure on personal relationships. Their employers meanwhile are conducting a well-financed misinformation campaign against them and obstinately refusing to negotiate. They are being told, essentially, that they can go to hell.

The claims by management that writers are overpaid and have no right to complain if the giant firms appropriate virtually all the wealth generated by the Internet are malicious and self-serving. On the other hand, there is no need to conceal the fact that, in relation to many other sections of the working population, employed film and television writers are relatively privileged. To a certain extent,

this has 'freed' them to conduct the present struggle.

Millions of workers in the US, stuck in 8- or 10- or 15-dollar-an-hour jobs, abandoned to their fate by the so-called labor movement, find it difficult to raise their noses from the grindstone long enough to utter a protest. That will change, sooner rather than later, but at present these workers merely seethe with anger.

The general public hostility toward corporate power found expression in some of the early samplings of public attitudes toward the writers strike. In two of those polls, an astonishingly small percentage of those surveyed supported the entertainment companies (in one case, 4 percent!) From such figures one derives some sense of the real state of public opinion in the US, as opposed to the manufactured variety presented in the media.

Engaged in their own difficult struggle, the striking writers should be more inclined to give some thought to what the rest of the working class endures on a daily basis. This would be important in the development of more critical and insightful films and television programs.

What is the quality of daily life in America?

If employed, a worker faces a boss with virtually unchecked power to abuse, discipline and fire, the continual drive for productivity, cutthroat competition for advancement and, overall, a dog-eat-dog atmosphere that exhausts and demoralizes.

Millions of service, part-time, temporary and immigrant (documented or undocumented) workers toil away in the US under truly wretched conditions. They are socially and politically disenfranchised. They don't count. They are not the targets of the enticements run in the *New York Times* to "own a piece of paradise" in Park City, Utah, ("Over \$1,000,000 of designer furniture and specialty art") or an "English cottage" in Captiva, Florida, "reduced to \$3,995,000." Too often they are non-people in film and television as well.

The jobless, the homeless, the youth in poor neighborhoods and small towns and cities—they simply disappear from view as far as the mainstream culture goes.

For the most part life in American films and television programs has only the vaguest connection with existence as it is experienced by vast numbers of people in the US. It misleads, obscures, confuses more than anything else. It fails, by and large, to enlighten, elevate or amuse. This matters a great deal. The generally low cultural level of the population, including its professional layers, is a factor in the present politically stultifying climate and the ability of the ruling elite to commit the most

outrageous crimes with impunity.

False or clichéd or superficial pictures of life have consequences. They hinder the population from looking at itself in the mirror, from seeing its inadequacies and errors. They prevent people from understanding human psychology in a rich and nuanced fashion. They help them fall into the various ideological and political traps laid by the powers that be.

The artists are called upon to engage in an all-sided manner with life, not to shy away from it. This is what Russian literature did in the nineteenth century, or German theater in the 1920s—or, within certain definite limits, American films in the 1930s and 1940s.

Has the strike brought the writers, or at least the more thoughtful element among them, closer to life?

There are so many stories to tell, so much human drama. One only has to go out into the street, or stop in a store, or engage in a conversation in a restaurant. One doesn't have to write an overtly political or social piece, although those should be written too; all important human drama (or comedy) is bound up with social life. If writers tell the truth about reality, and don't simply seek to impress with their cleverness or coldness, they contribute something.

Telling the truth requires knowledge—of society, of history, of human psychology. Most of the things that matter in the film and television world at present—career, income, fame, image—are a waste of time, or worse.

We hear objections. 'You're asking far too much of a popular entertainment medium. People simply want to escape, not think about things.' This argument is wrong from any number of directions.

In the first place, one of our criticisms of current 'entertainment' is that it's not terribly entertaining. The steady erosion of audiences for network television is one indication of that, and so too the unsteady box office figures. Remove the media bombardment and how many spectators would show up for most Hollywood products? The art associated with American films at their best has largely been lost.

In any event, for those who have a virtual monopoly over what the vast majority of the country gets to see to claim they are only giving the population 'what it wants' is utterly dishonest and cynical.

Popular entertainment and thinking are not mutually exclusive, as the history of world culture attests. The population also thinks and feels, and has insight. Events and social development leave sharp traces in mass thinking, even if only in a semi-conscious, semi-articulated form. Again, the entertainment industry suffers profoundly today precisely on account of its *distance*—with rare exceptions—from popular life.

Do people simply want to escape? If so, that would first and foremost be a criticism of a reality so bleak and painful that it requires escaping from. Diversion and relaxation are a necessary part of life, under any conditions. But if there is widespread dedication to not thinking about important things that is an indictment of a society and culture that have numbed many and made them insensitive. Such difficulties have to be overcome by the artists—what else is their task?

Is a sophisticated, intelligent popular culture out of the question?

One only has to look to the history of the American film industry itself. Spectators flocked to the films of Charlie Chaplin, a comic genius, and a social critic of the first order. And that second quality was not incidental to his phenomenal success. Orson Welles, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks—all of these individuals produced popular entertainment, within the bounds of their own talents and outlooks, that didn't sacrifice artistry for the supposed sake of popularity.

The fault doesn't lie with the population, but a decayed, dishonest and empty culture.

We will also be told—by 'radicals'—that, given the constraints of corporate control and the power of money, or even (especially profoundly) that since the dominant ideas of any period are the ideas of the ruling class, nothing can be done about the current state of filmmaking and television.

The existing relations in the film and television world are intolerable, incompatible with decent conditions for those employed in the industry and with sincere artistic work, and need to be transformed. That is the task of the working class and the socialist movement. But that is not an argument for folding one's arms in the meantime.

Where censorship or self-censorship exists, it needs to be exposed and fought. We don't see a great deal of straining against the limitations at present. We see far too much accommodation with the latter.

There are resources and opportunities available for those with something to say. The artists who align themselves to important present-day realities, who think and feel deeply, who address themselves to the burning problems of large numbers of people who have no one to speak for them at present—such artists will find an audience. And if they have struggles with the authorities, that will become a popular cause in itself. How many film or television artists in America today can claim they have defied official public opinion, whatever the cost, on behalf of the truth? Not nearly enough.

The first thing, in our view, is to have important things to say; tactics and strategy will follow.

The present strike, we hope, will point some of the most serious writers, and others, in the direction of these issues.



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