

Striking writer speaks to the WSWS

John Andrews
9 February 2008

Striking writers, supported by Screen Actors Guild members and others, held mass pickets throughout the day Thursday outside Disney's Burbank studio. Writers who spoke to the WSWS were completely in the dark about the terms of the supposed deal reached with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) several days earlier.

The writers were looking forward to the meeting Saturday night to learn about the details. Most said they were anxious to go back to work and were cautiously optimistic about the deal, but when pressed thought that the terms might turn out to be unsatisfactory. Many said they wanted to stay out on strike until the members had the opportunity to vote on the deal, and expressed confidence that the members would reject it if it were not satisfactory.

WSWS reporters spoke to Ethan Reiff, who with his partner Cyrus Boris has written for "Sleeper Cell," "Brimstone" and other television and film projects. His sentiments were fairly typical.

"I'm never going to join the Socialist Party or vote for a socialist candidate, anything like that, but nonetheless, I found that on my way into the first big Writers Guild meeting just before the strike they were handing out flyers and a guy handed me a paper. I didn't know what it was but I took a look and I saw 'Socialist' something and I just laughed out loud and crushed it into a ball. I wadded it up. But now, I'm at least willing to listen to the socialist perspective." Holding up a WSWS leaflet he added, "I'll read this when I get home. The strike has definitely moved me several steps to the left."

"How many members in the WGA [Writers Guild] across the country are there, a little more than 10,000?" Ethan asked, "When 10,000 people, each one of whom is about as individualistic as you can get, in terms of politics, world view, ideology, you know, perspective on everything under the sun, have to all get together,

and work as one unit, one group, a union, a guild, it's a big challenge. I think it's kind of shocking to the other side, the AMPTP—and somewhat shocking to a lot of us—how well we've managed to hang together for three months."

WSWS: What do you think is going to happen on Saturday?

Ethan: That's a good question. Nobody knows the details. All I know is that the leadership of the Guild basically prepared for this strike for two years before it started and has led the strike for the past three months, and done so pretty effectively. I wouldn't think that they would get us all together and show us a deal that the vast majority of us probably wouldn't say "Good enough." It's not going to be perfect; none of us expects it to be perfect.

WSWS: What effect has the Directors Guild agreement had?

Ethan: Well, it will be better than the Directors Guild deal. The question is how much better and in which specific areas.

You have to understand, there are some fundamental differences between the Directors Guild and their agenda, their interests, their own legitimate self-interest, and the Writers Guild, and our agenda, our interests to serve our membership's legitimate self-interest. The majority of the members of the Directors Guild, probably more than 60 percent, are assistant directors, production managers, unit direction managers, who don't see individual checks with their names on them from residuals.

Then there's like another 10 to 20 percent of the membership who are A-list and B-plus-list directors, big shots who will negotiate an individual deal with their lawyer or agent and the network, where they get a percentage of every dollar that gets earned. Neither of those two groups could give a damn about the general residual system.

In between, there's a small group of directors in television or smaller movies who care about what we care about and what SAG cares about. But they're not the driving force of their union because there's a lot fewer of them. The union cares more about satisfying the bigger blocs of their membership, as they should. But in the WG, just like you said, everybody cares about profit participation, everybody cares about residuals.

WSWS: So, do you think that if the WGA leadership comes out with a deal that's maybe just hardly better than the Directors Guild deal, that the membership will turn it down?

Ethan: Not all the membership. Because, again, you have thousands of people who are all individuals. There's already been one somewhat well-known screenwriter, that guy John Ridley, who deserted the union and a handful of soap opera writers. But out of a union of 10,000 people, with just one screenwriter and 10 to 12 soap opera writers as the only deserters, after three months of walking that picket line, it's pretty awesome from the membership perspective. The truth is, me, I'll go back for almost anything, because I have a lot to go back to, and I want to go back. But, if it's really bad, I don't know what I'll do. But I don't expect that's going to be the case. It could be, but ... I don't know.

WSWS: What kind of a deal will you get on Saturday?

Ethan: I think it will be an improvement over the DG deal and it will be less than we would have hoped, and at that point ... you know, we're not being brought to this to vote on, we're just being brought up to date. And then we'll see what the membership feels about it. The other thing for the members is, this strike is really—and I'm speaking for myself—but to me, the strike is about only one issue from the get-go, and that is profit participation for digital distribution. It's about gaining a tiny piece of the profit when it's shown to an audience over the Internet.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact