

Film and television writers should reject the contract deal

World Socialist Web Site editorial board
9 February 2008

The following statement will be distributed Saturday to membership meetings of the Writers Guild of America in Los Angeles and New York. We urge striking writers to download the pdf version of this statement and help distribute it as widely as possible.

Film and television writers assembled in New York and Los Angeles on Saturday should decisively reject any proposed contract that does not meet their basic demands for decent compensation. A rotten compromise is in the making that represents a betrayal of the writers' interests. It should be voted down and the strike extended to the entire industry.

A massive media campaign has been launched to stampede the writers back to work. The *Los Angeles Times*, *Variety*, the *New York Times* and the broadcast media, acting on behalf of the conglomerates, have declared the strike essentially over. Writers should ask themselves: What kind of a settlement would be so pleasing to these big business media outlets? The answer is clear: Only one that gives a free hand to the corporate giants to grab the vast portion of the wealth that will be created by the new digital media.

It is above all necessary to consider the fundamental political and social issues that have been at the root of the struggle from the outset. The central questions underlying the strike go to the heart of the entire economic and political setup not only in the film and television industry, but in society as a whole.

The most basic issue is the incompatibility of private ownership of film and television production, and the media and entertainment industry as a whole, with decent economic and creative conditions for writers, actors and others in the industry, as well as the cultural needs of the population.

The entire weight of the entertainment industry, media and political establishment is being brought to bear against the writers to make them wind up their strike and conform to the demands of the conglomerates.

The leadership of the Directors Guild (DGA) became part of that process, agreeing to a miserable deal that provides a pitiful amount for ad-supported streaming and electronic sell-throughs. It has become universally accepted in the media that the DGA settlement must be a 'template' for the writers. Who determined that? The DGA deal, if applied to the writers, even in a modified form, would represent a massive roll-back.

The Writers Guild (WGA) leaders have held a few weeks of 'informal' talks with Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers representatives, including Robert Iger of Disney and Peter Chernin of News Corp, two of the most ruthless figures in the industry. Out of these secret talks is supposed to have emerged an agreement that will satisfy the essential needs of the writers.

There is a long history of secret negotiations between employers and unions, and the results for workers are always bad. The real aim of the media blackout has been to control the discussion, limit opposition and spoon-feed the membership under conditions the Guild leaders consider favorable.

The writers strike has never been simply about compensation for reuse of material on the new digital media, as legitimate a demand as that is. The striking writers speak for millions of working people in this country and internationally who have had enough of the complete dominance of economic and political life by a tiny, fabulously wealthy elite.

The support for the strike among actors, others in the industry and the working class public lays bare the vast class divide in the US. It explains why Rupert Murdoch, nervously, accused the strikers of wanting "to change to some sort of socialist system and drag down the companies."

The strike has now intersected with the 2008 election campaign. The deafening silence of the leading Democrats has been notable. Aside from a few perfunctory and predictable statements at the beginning of the strike, and the inevitable picket-line photo opportunity, the Democratic presidential candidates have made no mention of the strike, even in the Los Angeles debate held at the Kodak Theatre.

The notion, shared by the Writers Guild leadership, that the writers could advance their struggle by making appeals to the Democrats has been exposed by the strike itself. The role of the Democratic-controlled Congress in continuing funding for the brutal neo-colonial Iraq war, despite popular opposition, has appalled wide layers of the population.

There is now an effort to build up Barack Obama as an alternative to both Bush and those Democrats, like Hillary Clinton, identified with support for the Bush administration's drive to war. The suggestion will be made by some, if only as a subtext, that not much can be done now under the Bush

administration, but things will change under the Democrats. This is a great illusion.

Writers need to bear in mind that the people whom they are currently battling—described recently by writer-producer Joss Whedon on *United Hollywood* as “inefficient, power-hungry, thieving corporate giants”—provide massive funding for the Democratic Party. So far in the 2008 election cycle, the television, film and music industry has given the various candidates \$15,354,208 in contributions, and 77 percent of that has gone to the Democrats. More than 90 percent of donations from motion picture production has gone to the Democrats.

Sumner Redstone’s National Amusements (\$193,850), Time Warner (\$124,150) and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp (\$99,350) are on the list of Hillary Clinton’s 20 largest contributors; National Amusements (\$220,950) and Time Warner (\$142,718) are also on Barack Obama’s list of leading contributors.

Recently, the extreme right *New York Post*, one of Murdoch’s newspapers, endorsed Obama. Asked about the shift, Murdoch explained that “the editors felt that Obama was a real chance for something new, and we didn’t agree with a lot of Mrs. Clinton’s national policies.”

The Obama campaign is being organized in order to divert growing social opposition within harmless channels and to provide the American political establishment with a ‘new face.’ But the support of the AFL-CIO and other unions for the Democrats and the two-party system has been a disaster for the working class, subordinating workers to the interests of big business.

The WGA leadership has no perspective for upholding the interests of its members because of its political and social outlook—its support for the Democrats and defense of the existing entertainment industry and profit system as a whole.

Inevitably, the guild leadership is allowing everything to be determined by the employers’ time-line (the approach of the Academy Awards, the onset of pilot season, etc.). ‘Time is pressing to settle the strike’ howls the media. The guild leadership, in the end, responds to the needs of the moguls and the most privileged social layers in Hollywood, not rank-and-file writers.

It is necessary for writers to consider social reality, including their own struggles, in the widest and most comprehensive manner. One of the great difficulties in America today, which is not separate from the general problem of the development of political consciousness, is that the population is given so few accurate and rich pictures of life in film and television.

The conflict between the writers and the conglomerates extends to every single issue, not only economic conditions. The production of serious, creative, courageous and thought-provoking film and television at every point collides with or is stifled by the virtual dictatorship exercised by the handful of billionaires who own and control the industry.

Filmmaking and film writing have remarkable traditions in

the US, despite the shortsightedness and philistinism of the studio executives.

In the 1930s, out of their experiences of the Depression and struggles in Hollywood, a large number of leading film writers moved to the left, many of them joining or supporting the Communist Party. The post-war blacklist and McCarthyite purges, fully supported by the American labor bureaucracy and the Screen Writers Guild of the time, did enormous damage to the film industry, which has not recovered to this day.

Simple trade unionism was inadequate in the 1930s, and it is even less suited to confronting the complex realities of US society and modern global capitalism in the 21st century. Artists, disgusted with the increasing brutality and militarization of American life, need to think deeply and trace the source of the problems to their roots in the economic foundations of society. Their problem is capitalism; Hollywood is US capitalism in bold.

Film and television writers, experience has shown, are treated no differently than workers in offices, factories and every other work place in America and all over the world. This social reality has to become part of the writers’ consciousness, both as it affects their conduct in the strike and their artistic efforts.

The great changes in political and social reality are going to bring about a turn to politics and to the left by masses of people in the US.

In our view, the writers strike can be taken forward only on the basis of a new, socialist strategy, one that takes into account great social and political questions. This means a political break with the Democrats and the two-party system and the building of a mass, independent political movement of working people.

We urge writers and their supporters to attend the meeting Wednesday, February 13 at UCLA sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Students for Socialist Equality and take up these issues.

Public Meeting

A Socialist Perspective for Film and Television Writers

Date: Wednesday, February 13

Time: 7 p.m.

Location: Bunche Hall, Room 2209A—UCLA

Parking: Proceed to UCLA Main Gate on Westwood Blvd to purchase parking and get directions to the building



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact