

WSWS arts editor speaks in Los Angeles on implications of screen writers' strike

Our reporter
15 February 2008

World Socialist Web Site Arts Editor David Walsh spoke to a varied group of students, writers, supporters and others at the University of California at Los Angeles on Wednesday, February 13. Sponsored by the UCLA chapter of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the meeting centered on the 100-day strike by members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the proposed contract worked out between the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and WGA negotiators.

As Walsh noted, the *World Socialist Web Site* covered the strike since its beginning in early November, publishing over 40 articles and interviewing over 90 picketers. In addition to reporting on the strike, the WSWS analyzed the strategies and tactics of the AMPTP and the union leadership, and warned that a rotten compromise was in the making when union officials began “informal talks” with producers. This prognosis was borne out when details of the deal were revealed. (See “US film and television writers to vote on end to strike”)

Walsh did not limit his talk to the strike and its aftermath. Instead he placed it within the context of the history of the struggle between writers and the studios and the current crisis of capitalism.

Calling the strike a “major social episode,” Walsh said that, from the outset, the WSWS’s coverage placed the strike in the broadest social and political context. “We argued, first of all, that the writers’ strike was an expression of a growing international resistance of workers to the relentless assault on their jobs and living standards and democratic rights.” As examples of this resistance, he cited the struggles of autoworkers in the US, postal workers in Great Britain, French railway workers and the German train drivers. All of these struggles were betrayed by their union bureaucracies, as—the writers will find out—was the WGA strike.

Walsh referred to a few of the events that have occurred during the 100 days of the strike: the subprime crisis, which “has emerged as a full-blown credit crisis, threatening some very large financial institutions and the stability of the world financial system”; the volatility of the stock market; the increasing severity of the recession; the continuing decline of American capitalism, “with GM reporting a nearly \$40 billion loss for the year and a proposal to buy out the jobs of 74,000

production workers, to be replaced by younger workers whose pay and benefits packages will cost the company one-third as much. All of this has been facilitated, indeed supervised, by the United Auto Workers, which has turned itself into one of the largest health care managers in the US.”

“In this general economic climate of instability, breakdown, slump, for writers or anyone else to imagine they can pursue their union activities unaffected would be simply myopic.”

Walsh argued that the outcome of the WGA strike was an expression of this general situation and the dead end of the trade union perspective. The membership of the guild was presented with a rotten compromise by its leadership. He noted that this is becoming increasingly clear to all those who care to look.

Despite the claims of union officials and the corporate news outlets that the deal is a victory for the WGA, “the press is already letting the cat out of the bag” via recent articles in the business press, noted Walsh. Quoting from recent articles in such organs as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Economist*, *MarketWatch* and *Variety*, Walsh illustrated how the producers—using the agreement with the Directors Guild, the wavering of well-off writers and show runners, the threat of bad press coverage, as well as simple intransigence—forced the union negotiators to dance to the producers’ tune. The *Times* wrote that as far back as November, News Corp. executive Peter Chernin predicted how he would exploit divisions among the writers to bring the strike to an end on the producers’ terms. Walsh quoted the article as saying, “His prediction was spot on.”

Walsh also noted that the cozy relationship that existed between WGA’s chief negotiators and the producers—replete with visits to Chernin’s home, where they sipped Scotch with Chernin and Warner Bros. Chairman Barry Meyers and CBS Corp. Chief executive Leslie Moonves—would have been anathema—or at least something *not* to flaunt—to labor officials just a decade ago. However, he insisted that “the issue is not the weakness or failure of nerve of individuals, but the worthlessness of national-reformist trade unionism for the working class.”

As for the specifics of the agreement, Walsh cited a few comments from the above mentioned sources about various

aspects of the contract: the 17-24 day window on residual payments; the scuttling of residuals on reality television and animation shows; dropping of the demand for a higher share of DVD returns. Walsh asserted, “One could go through some of the other provisions, but that’s not our central purpose here this evening. To claim this is a ‘historic’ settlement is to put a very cheap price on history. We don’t believe flattery or self-congratulation ever helped anyone. The majority of writers will continue to bleed and it’s not clear, once all the various sides of the situation are taken into account, that they will even continue to bleed at a slower rate. This was a concessions contract.”

Walsh noted that in its coverage of the strike, the WSWS refused to limit itself to strictly economic issues.

“In fact, the ‘economic issues’ in the writers’ strike, what share of the wealth generated by their work will fall to the writers, is a profoundly social and political matter. It raises the issue of intellectual property rights and the need to oppose the appropriation of the writers’ work, which no one currently challenges, by the studios and networks.

“The WSWS insisted that the writers needed to begin consciously seeing themselves as opponents of capitalism and the two-party system that defends it. We rejected the fraudulent statements of support from the Democratic Party presidential candidates and detailed their close connections to the Hollywood moguls with whom the writers were engaged in battle,” said Walsh.

“The immediate conflict is over,” he continued, “but there will be no return to normalcy. He encouraged writers “to consider matters in a new light: the industry and their role within it, their own work as artists and the great social and political problems.”

Walsh then asked the question, “What will the impact of the strike be upon the writers themselves?” He then quoted from a WSWS article in mid-January: “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.”

Walsh noted that this assessment remained as accurate today as it was several weeks ago when the WSWS first published the article. However, the writers are themselves limited currently by their own lack of knowledge of history and large-scale social processes.

“How is that going to change?” asked Walsh. He insisted that objective events would play the decisive role but also that writers had to once again take up the question of socialism.

“A socialist element has to emerge in the film and television industry, which consciously fights for the unity of workers in this industry and workers globally on a program aimed at radically altering economic and political life,” said Walsh.

He continued: “The development of a more critical and self-critical, socialistically minded community of writers, actors, directors and others in Hollywood is a decisive question, both

artistically and politically. The ideological atmosphere of the last several decades has not been conducive to complex, genuinely realistic, compassionate, committed work. Everything backward and selfish has been encouraged to the detriment of the film and television industry.”

“A different social situation, above all, the emergence of the working class in open opposition to the present order, will do a great deal to improve the climate, to scatter the clouds of skepticism and pessimism which cover the horizon of mankind, as Trotsky once put it.”

Walsh’s wide-ranging discussion included a brief history of the WGA, which goes back to the first days of sound film production. He discussed the fact that many writers, who came of age during the Depression, were drawn to socialist and left-wing ideas. A large number joined the Stalinist Communist Party USA, mistakenly seeing the organization as the way to bring about change.

However, in the context of the Cold War, the radicalism of Hollywood unleashed a counterattack from the bourgeoisie. “The crimes of Stalinism became the pretext for purging the entertainment industry of left-wing elements, a process that had the most devastating impact on the industry itself. Anti-capitalist sentiment became essentially illegal, and largely remains so,” said Walsh.

He continued: “Writers and actors will have to settle accounts with this legacy of anticommunism and reject it decisively. Otherwise they are eternally hamstrung and limited. If genuflecting to American “democracy,” i.e., American capitalist ‘free enterprise,’ remains a precondition for offering criticisms, then no serious criticism or opposition will emerge.”

Walsh noted how the WSWS was generally received on the picket lines “with considerable openness, and in many cases, genuine warmth.”

Walsh’s lecture was followed by a lively question and answer period, in which those in attendance questioned him on a range of issues, including why the press was so brazen about the antidemocratic character of the way in which the WGA deal was hatched and how the WSWS thought it was possible to overcome the problems of political consciousness among writers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact