

Writers Guild of America holds strike authorization vote

Our reporters
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On Tuesday, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) began holding a strike authorization vote that will continue until April 17. A yes vote would give the union the ability to call a strike when the current three-year contract expires May 1. The WGA has 4,700 members in the WGA East and over 24,000 members in the WGA West.

The current round of contract negotiations opened March 20 between the WGA and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which represents the major film studios, the big four television networks, as well as the biggest streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon. Involved are companies presided over by some of the richest individuals on the planet.

The vote is taking place at a time when major entertainment conglomerates are laying off thousands of employees (as in the case of the ongoing Disney job slaughter or the cuts at Warner Bros. and Netflix last year). In the eventuality of a strike, the companies are preparing to delay premieres with original content until the autumn and/or produce unscripted programming not subject to WGA agreement.

The contract will cover three years and set the bargaining pattern for the other large entertainment unions. The contracts covering more than 300,000 members of the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) expire on June 30. The last few negotiations have seen the DGA lead the bargaining.

One of the last occasions that the WGA led the round of bargaining was in 2007-08 when writers struck the entertainment conglomerates for 100 days in a militant, determined effort, shutting down Hollywood and television production for the duration. In the end, the WGA leadership wore down the writers and imposed a bad contract full of loopholes, while proclaiming it a “historic” victory.

The WGA leadership’s claims made at the time are belied by the writers’ conditions, as documented by the union itself, 15 years later.

In one of its contract bulletins, “Writers Are Not Keeping Up,” the WGA points out that while “company profits have remained high and spending on content has grown, writers are falling behind.”

The WGA reports that “at every job title,” more writers “work at MBA [Minimum Basic Agreement] minimum now than a decade ago.” In 2013-14, one third of all television writers were paid

minimum, whereas “now half are working at minimum. Increasing numbers of seasoned writers, including showrunners, are now paid no overscale premium for their years of experience.”

Median weekly writer-producer pay, the union acknowledges, “has *declined* 4 percent over the last decade. Adjusting for inflation, the decline is 23 percent.”

Even elementary protections have been denied writers on the many streaming comedy-variety and talk shows. The companies have refused “MBA protections—minimums for scripts and weeklies—for comedy-variety writers” when they work on such streaming series. Under the current agreement, “compensation for writers on streaming comedy-variety series is entirely negotiable. Unsurprisingly, the amounts paid to these streaming writers are often lower than those paid to their peers.”

Median screenwriter pay, explains the WGA, “hasn’t budged since 2018. When accounting for inflation, screen pay has declined 14 percent in the last five years. And that pay can be stretched over unacceptably long periods of time—particularly for those paid at or close to minimum.”

The union’s claim in the aftermath of the 2008 strike was *precisely* that they had effectively blocked the conglomerates’ efforts to make the transition to streaming at the expense of the writers and had obtained a significant “share of the pie” for the writers. In essence, it was a few crumbs. Now they admit that the companies “have leveraged the streaming transition to underpay writers, creating more precarious, lower-paid models for writers’ work.”

This is a devastating self-indictment. Where was the WGA? The union leaders act as though this all went on while they were somewhere else. If the big companies were able to steadily depress the writers’ collective income in this manner over the course of a decade, why should anyone have any confidence that the union will do any better in 2023?

These facts vindicate the position of the WWS at the conclusion of the 2007-08 strike: “Any objective analysis indicates that the companies, while caught unawares by the determination of the writers, were obliged to give up very little. The ‘historic’ gains claimed by the WGA are illusory. In fact, both living standards and working conditions for the average writer will continue to decline.”

A serious perspective begins with the understanding that the writers confront a handful of ruthless conglomerates determined to further cut costs and reduce staffing under conditions of economic

turmoil. Earnings remain massive, along with executive compensation, but the situation is rife with uncertainty and the companies have no intention of giving up a penny of their profits, certainly not to film and television writers.

Future technological developments, including the use of artificial intelligence, while *objectively* possessing enormous potential, will only be used under capitalism as bludgeons against existing working conditions, pay and benefits.

Moreover, the issues in the writers' fight are not purely economic. As the WWSWS argued time and again during the 2007-08 strike, the writers historically have been seen by the studios and other firms as a dangerous challenge to their unlimited and unquestioned control over film and television programming. More than profits are involved, as significant as those are. The conglomerates' management always seek to impose their views of American life on film and television. They want an intimidated and atomized group of writers, who will do what they are told at an explosive social and political juncture.

Meanwhile, at their nominal head, the writers have a complacent, well-heeled WGA leadership, who travel in many of the same social circles as their "bosses." These people are dangerously unprepared and unfit to lead an uncompromising struggle.

The WGA has put forward a "Pattern of Demands," a statement of general objectives in the present negotiations, which was approved on March 7 by 98.4 percent of those voting.

The list of demands includes increased "minimum compensation significantly to address the devaluation of writing in all areas of television, new media and features," standardized compensation and residual terms for features whether released theatrically or on streaming, addressing various abusive practices engaged in by the entertainment companies and a series of other general concerns. The toothless Pattern of Demands commits the WGA leadership to virtually nothing. The most minimal gains can be presented as "increased compensation" and a step forward.

Strike action to win significant gains and beat back the companies' attacks is on the minds of many writers. But the outlook of the WGA leadership was on display in a recent interview conducted by the *Hollywood Reporter* with the union's new chief negotiator Ellen Stutzman, along with the co-chairs of the negotiating committee, Chris Keyser and David A. Goodman.

When asked about the possibility of a strike, for example, Goodman replied, "Wow. You know, we go through this every three years, the guild negotiates every three years. All the talk of strike doesn't actually come from anybody at the guild," while Stutzman put in, "I'll just say that, obviously, we're going go into negotiations with the goal of making a deal," i.e., avoiding a strike. This is known as fighting from one's knees.

The three WGA leaders would not commit themselves to any specific goals. Keyser observed that "I don't think we think about it in terms of numbers ... our priority is: It's compensation, compensation, compensation." At the same time, the union leaders sought to play down expectations, by asserting that "you can't future-proof everything" in the film and television business. This is a justification in advance for foreseeing nothing and giving away the store, as the WGA has done over the past two decades.

In a video released March 17 by the WGA, Kay Cannon, a

member of the negotiating committee, indicated the union would not release any information about the negotiations, set to begin three days later, unless something significant happened. Cannon asked for "patience" and thanked the membership for "trusting us to fight for all of us." This is entirely unacceptable. Secret, behind-closed-doors negotiations have resulted in disaster after disaster for every section of the working class. Based on its record, there is no reason to place "trust" in the WGA leadership.

Or any of the entertainment industry unions. In 2021, when a majority of its 60,000 members rejected a contract, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees implemented its undemocratic electoral college-like "delegate system" and imposed the rotten deal.

The issues facing film and television writers and workers generally are economic, political and cultural. While a yes vote and preparations for a strike should proceed, certain unvarnished realities need to be faced: no long-term progress can be made while a handful of giant conglomerates have a stranglehold on film and television production. The revival of a consciously socialist tendency among the writers, politically opposed to capitalism and dedicated to socially critical artistic work oriented toward the lives and interests of the great majority of the population, is long overdue.

For all these reasons, the writers cannot submit quietly to the dictates and maneuvers of the WGA. To carry forward their struggle, to formulate and win ambitious demands, the writers will have to take the leadership out of the hands of the union officialdom and create democratically controlled rank-and-file committees.

Such committees would not be parochial, simply concerned with the writers' issues, but would fight for unity with production workers, directors and actors, along with other sections of workers in struggle, such as teachers, health care, rail and dockworkers. The rank-and-file committees would strive at every point to broaden the scope of the struggle to include questions of artistic freedom, a break with the Democratic Party and genuine political independence from the corporate Hollywood establishment.

Any WGA member interested in forming a rank-and-file committee should contact the WWSWS.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact