

Television and film writers vote overwhelmingly to strike

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The membership of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) came back with an overwhelming vote in favor of a strike in the event that the WGA and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) do not reach an agreement by the May 1 expiry of the current contract.

The WGA reported Monday that with 78.79 percent of the members voting, 97.85 percent voted to authorize a strike—or 9,020 in favor of strike authorization and only 198 opposed. According to the Guild, both the percentage voting in favor of a strike and the actual turnout set a record.

In a statement, the WGA asserted that “Our membership has spoken. Writers have expressed our collective strength, solidarity, and the demand for meaningful change in overwhelming numbers. Armed with this undeniable demonstration of unity and resolve, we will continue to work at the negotiating table to achieve a fair contract for all writers.”

For its part, the AMPTP, which speaks for the major film studios (Paramount, Sony, Universal, Disney and Warner Bros.), the major television networks, as well as the biggest streaming services such as Netflix, Apple TV+ and Amazon, issued a statement contemptuously dismissing the strike vote. Such a vote, the employers declared, “has always been part of the WGA’s plan, announced before the parties even exchanged proposals. Its inevitable ratification should come as no surprise to anyone.” This is the arrogant voice of the corporate aristocracy speaking to its serfs.

The AMPTP is placing its hopes in the ability of the WGA to control the writers and in its eventual readiness to surrender on the major questions, as it did in the 2007-08 strike.

However, the conditions facing writers have worsened dramatically since then and the conflict between the writers and the AMPTP giants now takes place during a rising tide of working class struggles, in the US and internationally.

In reference to a possible strike, Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos commented Tuesday that “we want to work really hard to make sure we can find a fair and equitable deal so we can avoid one.” The companies, however, were bracing and

making preparations for a strike. If there is a strike, Sarandos warned, “We have a large base of upcoming shows and films from around the world. We could probably serve our members better than most... We do have a pretty robust slate of releases to take us into a long time.”

The talks for a new contract began March 20, and the WGA agreement is the first to lead this year among the entertainment unions. The contract will presumably set the bargaining pattern for both the Directors Guild of America (DAG) and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), whose contracts both expire on June 30.

As the WGA has revealed, writers have seen their living standards steadily decline over the past decade. Median weekly writer-producer pay “has declined 4 percent over the past decade” in absolute terms. “Adjusting for inflation, the decline is 23 percent,” notes the union. “In addition to falling weekly pay, most writers on streaming shows are earning less per season because of shorter work periods.” At every job title, according to the WGA, “more writers work at MBA [Minimum Basic Agreement] minimum now than a decade ago. In the 2013-14 season, 33 percent of all TV series writers were paid minimum; now half are working at minimum.”

As we asked before, where has the WGA been all this time?

#WGAStrong is peppered with comments from angry writers, many complaining about their conditions. The determination is real and important. But writers will have to face the facts.

In a revealing comment made in passing, an article on the *Wrap* last August pointed out that residuals “for streaming productions are expected to be the core sticking point between studios and all labor organizations during next year’s contract negotiations, but especially with the Writers Guild, which is demanding significant increases in streaming compensation *after giving up much of its demands in that area to end the 2007 writers’ strike.*” (Emphasis added.)

This is not what the Guild said at the time. At the

conclusion of that 100-day strike, WGA West President Patric Verrone claimed to have scored a “historic” victory for writers, insisting that “Rather than being shut out of the future of content creation and delivery, writers will lead the way as TV migrates to the Internet and platforms for new media are developed.” This was not true, and the WSWS said so at the time.

Vanity Fair describes the writers’ situation in these terms: “TV writers (and to some extent movie screenwriters too) feel like they’ve been sidelined while streamers and studios have enjoyed the spoils of the streaming wars. Last year, Hollywood released nearly 600 original scripted shows ... But writers, who are typically paid per episode, have seen their earnings decimated by shorter season orders (typically just 6–12 episodes compared to the 22–24 episode orders of yore). Longer production times ... also mean they have to stretch their pay further. Outside of a handful of bold-named writer-producers ... stories abound about writers who are barely scraping by.”

In fact, the failure of the WGA to prosecute a decisive struggle in 2007-08, which would have required shutting down the entire industry, uniting with actors, directors and crew, opened the door to the now widely acknowledged decline and increasingly desperate conditions. The union can bluster all it likes, but it has no strategy to confront some of the most powerful and predatory conglomerates on the planet.

In any case, the conflict between the writers and the studios, television networks and streaming services is not merely an economic fight. There has always been a political and cultural component to the writers’ struggles, ever since the bitter battles of the 1930s. Screenwriters were the most left-wing element in Hollywood and came under vicious attack during the Red Scare. The Screen Writers Guild (a forerunner of the WGA) at the time fully cooperated with the witch-hunt and, in 1952, gave permission to the studios to “omit from the screen” the names of individuals who had not prostrated themselves before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

The giant companies continue to view the writers with suspicion and hostility. They have plans to squeeze as much as they can from the smallest possible number of writers, making use no doubt of Artificial Intelligence technology and other innovations.

In 2007, mogul Rupert Murdoch let the cat out of the bag when he complained that while the writers’ strike had first focused on the issue of the internet, “it had moved on. And now the rhetoric is, you know, big, fat companies, and us poor writers, as though ... they really want to change to some sort of socialist system and drag down the companies.”

Of course, as far as the WGA leadership was concerned,

Murdoch was way off the mark. But the implications of a confrontation between the conglomerates and the artists who create film and television material objectively has that component. It *inevitably* raises the incompatibility of genuine artistry and the profit needs of a handful of oligarchs. This has to become conscious in the thinking and activity of the writers. Any serious artistic effort includes the element of social critique and protest.

American society is increasingly dysfunctional. Anti-social killings, ecological and industrial disaster, the brazen activities of fascists with connections to high-ranking politicians—an overall level of social and political tension unknown in the modern era. Meanwhile, the US ruling elite is rushing toward war with Russia and China, organizing a war in Ukraine in alliance with a regime infested with anti-Semites and neo-Nazis. The compliance of the writers with the needs of the establishment will become an ever more pressing issue. Television and film will be forced to toe the line. A new McCarthyism is entirely possible.

Writers face enemies in the entertainment conglomerates overflowing with cash. These companies are run by some of the richest people in the world, and they are not about to give up a single cent of their ill-gotten gains.

The polite ladies and gentlemen of the WGA, whatever their intentions, are no match for these companies. There is no more reason to have confidence this time around in the outcome of talks held behind closed doors than on any previous occasion. The corporations intend to put the screws to the writers, and the writers need to begin to organize themselves into democratically controlled rank-and-file committees to take the reins of leadership into their own hands.

This leadership, to set out and win not only economic demands, but also the political and cultural demands of writers and workers as a whole, must be based on a socialist perspective. One that identifies capitalism for what it is, an all-sided attack on workers in every industry, as well as artists everywhere. A perspective that seeks to enrich the planet through a flowering of culture instead of a capitalist system that attempts to stifle and strangle creativity in the interests of profit.



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