Television writer on fight with studios, networks: “We’re looking at the extinction of writing as a profession”

David Walsh
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Television and film writers, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), voted recently in support of a strike when the current contract expires on May 1. With almost 80 percent of the WGA membership voting, 97.85 percent voted to authorize a strike—or 9,020 in favor of strike authorization and only 198 opposed.

The WSWS recently spoke to a veteran television writer about the issues facing writers and the upcoming strike deadline. The writer chose to remain anonymous.

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David Walsh: What are the biggest issues facing the writers, or their biggest concerns?

Writers Guild of America member: What’s happened in the last decade is that the streamers in particular (Netflix, Amazon, Apple, etc.), which come from Silicon Valley, have a different culture. Their point of view is: move fast and break things.

The executives, the management and their attorneys have taken the Writers Guild minimum basic agreement [MBA] and they’ve gone through it with a fine-tooth comb looking for every conceivable loophole, and exploiting those to the hilt. Basically, these companies would like to view us as Uber drivers.

Television writing, both drama and comedy, are traditionally team sports. You get 8-10 writers in a room and you work out a season of television—both the overall shape of the season, and the individual episodes. Then one writer takes responsibility for an episode, for writing it and seeing it through production, and often even post-production. That’s the traditional model in US television. It’s a labor-intensive process, and a season of television was the better part of a year’s work.

But the companies and their lawyers apparently thought to themselves: why are we spending all this money on writers? Let’s do proof of concept first. Let’s put together a small group of writers (as few as three or four) for a shorter period of time—as little as a month—and call it a “mini-room.” Pay them Writers Guild minimum every week. So everybody in this room, from staff writers to executive producers, is paid the same while working to lay out what the season could be. Then from there, the network or platform will either green-light a full writers room, or pull the plug.

But when you go into this mini-room and commit to this time, you don’t have any guarantee that if the show does go ahead, you’re going to be on the show, because those kinds of commitments are part of the “old model.”

The companies are saying: we’re not going to do that anymore; we’re not committing to you. We’re not promising you anything. We’re just saying, come in, we’ll pay you like piece workers, give us your best ideas and then get the hell out. Maybe you’re lucky enough to come back. Maybe you’re not. So, you may have helped create the template for a successful, long-running series, but you’ll never be paid another dime for your work.

A similar assault is under way on residuals: the money writers (and directors and actors) are paid for the perpetual re-use of their work. It’s a way of participating in the success of a project. Writers used to be able to depend on residuals to get them through lean times, but that is being chipped away at, too.

These are just a couple of examples of the many, many ways the writer’s job is being re-engineered to deprive writers of compensation, and a sense of ownership (creative, if not financial) of their work. The effect has been to drive down writers’ compensation over the last decade, by some 25 percent —and still falling. At the same time, filmed entertainment has become immensely more profitable, and the budgets for shows have gone up by 50 percent. The amounts of money they spend “creating content” are unimaginable, in real-world terms.

So, their profits are historic, and the basis for their profits are the films and programs, the “content” that writers create. But their business model is: we don’t share the profits: you get nothing. We owe you nothing. So, this is an extinction-level battle for writers, and other creatives, in this industry.

The same process has been going on in the Rust Belt for the last 40+ years. In this industry it started with production crews, and has been working its way up the food-chain. They’ve come for us now, and their goal seems to be to create a situation where they can have a handful of writers do the work that was historically done by many. So, we’re looking at the extinction of writing as a profession. Television writers, motion picture writers; all of us are more or less in the same boat.

We’re all being subjected to the same forces: the pressure on the studios to grow their profits—not simply to make a profit, but to continually increase their profits, and raise their Wall Street valuation. One way to grow profits is to fire tranches of people, and slash the pay of whoever remains.

This has been a wake-up call for the writers. There’s a realization that we’re literally fighting for our lives and livelihoods. Veteran writers like me are getting hurt, but we started working at a time when the protections won by the WGA in decades past allowed us to make a good living, build pensions and receive health care. But younger

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writers are struggling, and their future looks bleak. It's really for them that the battle has to be fought.

In the Guild rank and file, people are anxious and angry, but I think the historic approval of the strike authorization vote speaks for itself.

DW: Of course, it's true in every industry, but there's something particular about the entertainment industry: you have the sense they employ an army of lawyers, accountants, actuaries, financial experts who do nothing 24 hours a day but calculate how to screw writers, actors and directors and everybody else out of every possible penny.

WGA member: When our kids were in school, one of the other parents was a business affairs attorney for a studio. She said, "Yes, that is literally what we do. We are always working to find new ways to screw you over." We knew it, but it was refreshing to hear it confirmed.

DW: What is the precise situation with residuals?

WGA member: We create an asset, a film or a television show, for companies who will exploit it across all media platforms, in perpetuity. We don't get an ownership stake, so the idea of residuals is to allow us to participate, modestly, in the revenue stream this asset produces.

One of the only ways we had to keep the wolf from the door during lean times—and every writer goes through lean times—was residuals. In the old days of network television, a writer's first residual payment when their episode re-ran on network, was an additional script fee for the episode. And then over time, as it continued to be run, there were diminishing residuals, to the point where you'd see pennies. But the initial amounts were quite good, because the shows were generating immense advertising revenues.

Slowly, that model has been picked away at. They created tiered residuals, contending shows that ran on cable or were streamed didn't make as much money. So if you were on a network show your residuals were at a certain level. If you were on a cable show, your compensation was lower and so were your residuals. Now on streaming platforms, the residual model is very different, a much lower model. The money is not good.

I think residuals are something they're trying to wean us off. The basic attitude is: we threw some pennies in your cup. It's enough. Go away. Leave us alone.

Back in 2007-08, the companies were saying that streaming was a great unknown: "We don't know if we're even going to be able to monetize the internet, so you don't need to have jurisdiction over this." But we won jurisdiction over the internet in the last writers' strike, even if the compensation isn't yet where we want it to be. And the companies did know how to monetize the internet, so—I don't think it's unreasonable to conclude that they were lying then and they're lying now.

DW: It's quite a crowd.

WGA member: They might be among the worst people in the world, but they have lots of competition.

DW: How many years have you been writing for television?

WGA member: I started in television in the late '90s.

DW: So 25 years or so.

WGA member: I was fortunate to start working in television when shows like *The X-Files* and *NYPD Blue* and *ER* came on, shows that were forging new territory on commercial television. I thought it was an exciting time to be to be a television writer, so I gave it a try, and I got lucky. I got to work on shows that were smart and fun. I got to work with great actors, directors, and teams of artists and craftspeople behind the camera: art directors and cinematographers, composers—the hundreds of people whose work goes into the creation of an hour of television.

I've had a pretty good run. When I first started getting jobs, I thought: I hope I'm still working 10 years from now.

DW: Especially very recently, I would say that television has been a more interesting medium than film, obviously, particularly as film became blockbusters and comic book movies. But, for example, I look at Netflix these days and I see very little that's new and interesting.

WGA member: For a while they were really setting the world on fire. What we're hearing these days is that this "golden age" everyone's been talking about is over.

DW: This leads us to the bigger question: is artistic truthfulness and seriousness compatible with this handful of conglomerates that own everything?

WGA member: That's a core question, isn't it? My opinion is, no they're not.

At the risk of sounding even more cynical, the principal reason most of them invest in quality work is either to initially attract an audience, or to win awards—because they do like winning awards. It's a nice feeling for them to feel that, not only are they rich, successful and powerful, but they're also culturally significant.

DW: There's also a political and social history, the writers were a thorn in their side. The writers were the most left-wing element. There was a considerable Communist Party faction. It was the writers who suffered most in the blacklist for a reason. It's not just that they're a nuisance. They're also potentially troublemakers. They may have independent thoughts, and that's dangerous.

What do you think is the likelihood of a strike?

WGA member: My opinion is it's likely, because there's no way these companies are going to give up anything without a fight. So, likely, but not inevitable. I don't imagine a strike is good for their stock prices—Wall Street hates uncertainty, so maybe they'll come to the table with an acceptable offer out of enlightened self-interest. I don't know.

DW: You've been reading the WSWS for some time.

WGA member: I've always liked the political perspective. I don't always share your point of view, but I appreciate the honesty, and the moral, political and economic clarity. I also appreciate the breadth of your coverage: the amount of work you all put in is staggering.

The WSWS is one of the few places where I feel like I'm reading somebody who is looking the monster in the eye and saying, here's what this is. I rarely read the liberal press anymore. Good stuff now and then, but so much of it just seems to me to be propaganda, and outright lies.

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