

Strike by 11,500 film and TV writers in US begins

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Are you a TV or film writer? Fill out the form at the end of this article to learn more about rank-and-file committees.

Early Tuesday morning, 11,500 film and TV writers walked out on a strike on the West and East coasts of the United States. The workers, who are members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), voted by 98 percent to authorize the strike, which is over wages, staffing levels and job security, and residual payments from streaming services.

The strike, the first since the 100-day walkout in 2007-08, pits workers against Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which is made up of studio giants Paramount, Sony, Universal, Walt Disney, Warner Bros., broadcast networks ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC and streaming services Netflix, Apple TV+ and Amazon and some cable channels.

Writers are angry and ready to fight for substantial wage gains in the face of record high inflation. According to the WGA, median writer-producer pay has declined 4 percent, or 23% when adjusted for inflation, over the last few years. The companies are also using new technology, including Artificial Intelligence, to threaten the jobs of writers.

Film and TV writers are joining the wave of working-class struggles around the world, including the mass protests and strikes in France, the UK and Germany, and the mass protests against IMF austerity in Sri Lanka.

In the US, 1,300 grad student teaching assistants at the University of Michigan have been on strike for a month in defiance of anti-strike court orders, and in the coming months hundreds of thousands of New York City transit, US Postal Service letter carriers, UPS and Big Three autoworkers face major contract battles.

Like other workers, film and TV writers are in no mood to accept another pro-company contract negotiated by the union bureaucracy. On the contrary, they are determined to overturn the concessions handed over by the WGA bureaucracy when it betrayed the 2007-08 strike and ever since.

The Guild has publicly outlined a list of demands such as higher minimums, mandatory (but unspecified) staffing

levels for TV shows and a better formula for streaming residuals. But the record shows that WGA officials will climb back from even these inadequate demands. After cutting a deal with the producers in 2017, WGA officials asked, “Did we get everything we wanted? No. Everything we deserve? Certainly not.”

This underscores the need for writers to organize rank-and-file strike committees to transfer decision-making and power from the WGA apparatus to writers themselves. These committees will be the means through which workers can organize democratic discussions, draft up their own non-negotiable demands and outline the strategy to win them.

There is widespread support for the struggle among all workers in the entertainment industry and broader sections of the working class. Disgracefully, the leaders of the actors union, SAG-AFTRA, have ordered their 160,000 members, who include actors, announcers, broadcast journalists, recording artists, singers, stunt performers, voiceover artists and others, to cross the writers’ picket lines. In a statement, the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy stated, “If you are contracted to work on a project that continues production while the WGA is on strike, you are legally obligated to continue working by your personal services agreement and the ‘no strike’ clause in our collective bargaining agreements.”

In opposition to the efforts by WGA and AFL-CIO officials to isolate any strike, the rank-and-file strike committees must broaden the struggle, communicating with and coordinating common action with directors and actors whose contracts are also coming up, below-the-line production staff and broader sections of the working class.

Many of the issues currently being discussed by WGA and AMPTP executives away from the eyes and ears of writers are existential in nature. They include royalties (or residuals) and credits and other fundamental questions that led socialist writers and other left-wing militants to found the precursor to the WGA, the Screen Writers Guild (SWG), in 1933.

The first president of the SWG, John Howard Lawson, stated that, “The founding of the Guild in 1933 made it inevitable that there be a struggle with big business to

control the new forms of communication. I placed the emphasis on the creative responsibility of writers to have control of their material. As far back as 1933, I knew that this would be a fundamental struggle, so we opened that first big meeting with a speech I made in which I said that the writers were the owners of their own material.”

This entire premise is now under attack all down the line. As a WGA member told the WWS in an interview, “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.”

At the same time, the studios are using the threat of unemployment to beat back the militant demands of writers and other workers. Disney, Amazon, Showtime, Warner Bros., Netflix and other studios have laid off tens of thousands of workers over the last year even as they continue to record massive profits.

Netflix had gross profits of almost \$3.5 billion for the first quarter of this year alone and a gross profit of over \$12 billion for the year ending March 31, 2023. While this is a decline of 3.4 percent year over year, Netflix has not seen gross profits under \$12 billion since a year before the pandemic began when it was \$3 billion less.

Disney, on the other hand, saw its gross profit for the quarter ending December 31, 2022, as \$7.1 billion, which was a decline of slightly over 1 percent. Disney’s gross profit for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2022, however, was \$28.2 billion, which was a 12.5 percent increase year over year.

As for Amazon, in the first nine months of 2022, Amazon subscription services generated \$26 billion in revenue, which already exceeds their total revenue for all of 2020.

The entertainment conglomerates are not only laying off workers while continuing to bank billions of dollars; they are looking at squeezing entertainment workers in any way they can. It was just reported this week that the entire cast of the CBS comedy *Bob Abishola* will be reduced to recurring roles with a guarantee of only five episodes, while only the two leads will be considered regular cast members.

At the same time, *FilmLA* has reported that location shooting in Los Angeles fell 24 percent in the first three months of 2023, compared to the same period a year ago. With most production companies aware that a potential

strike was in the offing between the writers, actors, directors or all three, most scheduled any productions they were working on to end before May 1.

The WWS has stated on more than one occasion that writers are fighting not only over economic issues, as important as those are, but also over cultural and political issues as well. The fight between the writers and the entertainment conglomerates over who controls the output of writers’ creativity is one that can only be won on the basis of a socialist perspective.

This means challenging the “right” of the giant conglomerates and their Wall Street backers to own the creation of writers outright and to dictate what they can and cannot create.

Writers need to take the initiative out of the hands of the WGA apparatus and create their own democratically controlled rank-and-file strike committees to defeat any last-minute sellout deals and mobilize the full ranks of the WGA to win the demands workers need, not what the studios claim they can afford. This includes inflation-busting wage increases, a ban on job cuts and the reinstatement of laid off workers, reduced working hours with no loss of income and the payment of residuals, along with working conditions, determined by rank-and-file committees.

But writers cannot win this struggle on their own. Rank-and-file committees should reach out to directors and actors, below-the-line staff who had yet another rotten contract shoved down their throats by the IATSE leadership, even though it was voted down by a majority of the membership, and broader sections of workers, including on the ports, the railroads, UPS, and USPS and the auto industry.

The issues involved in these negotiations are class issues, and the struggles of entertainment workers for a better life must be linked up with workers in other industries throughout the US and around the world.

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