

US film and television workers strike: “We are not going to sit by silently as they keep paying us less and less”

Jacob Crosse, Marc Wells
3 May 2023

Some 11,500 US film and television workers began a strike on Tuesday, from New York City to Los Angeles. Strikers picketed in front of major studios, including Amazon, Disney, Fox, Netflix, Sony, Paramount and Warner Bros.

The writers’ struggle is part of global movement of the working class. From postal workers in the UK, to the mass movement in Sri Lanka against IMF austerity, to the millions of workers in France protesting cuts in pensions, workers around the world are fighting back.

The impact of the writers’ strike was confirmed Tuesday by an announcement from the major networks that all of the late-night television shows, such as NBC’s “The Tonight Show,” ABC’s “Jimmy Kimmel Live” and Comedy Central’s “Daily Show,” among others, would be airing reruns for the rest of the week. NBC also confirmed that “Saturday Night Live” would also be cancelled this week.

This is the first major action by the workers in the Writers Guild of America (WGA) since the 100-day strike in 2007-2008. That struggle ended with the WGA foisting a sell-out contract on the writers after they had been starved out for nearly four months.

The resulting contract, which, especially in terms of residuals for streaming services, tilted heavily in the favor of the corporations, left shareholders and executives reaping billions in profits. Meanwhile writers have been forced to rely on second jobs or even quit the profession altogether.

Speaking to WSWs reporters on the picket lines, striking writers not only spoke about their deteriorating economic positions, but also on the stifling creative and artistic atmosphere that has been cultivated by the major corporations that dominate the film and

television industry.

Andre, a writer working in Hollywood for almost 30 years, spoke about the effect of diminishing royalties for writers in the streaming era, compared to television before the internet. “We all have dry periods in this work. I have had some. And what keeps us afloat is these residuals, which over the years, still make money for the corporations. It’s not like the companies aren’t making money off of our re-runs. They obviously are. It has increased for the corporations because what we create is shown all over the world.”

Referring to the 2007-2008 struggle and the royalties negotiated by the WGA at the time for streaming, Andre said, “It was a foot-in-the-door. We thought that streaming might take off, but there was no guarantee. But as it happened, we expected that the companies would respond in kind. Now we know, they didn’t.”

Andre explained that while a major issue for writers was over streaming royalties, it was just one of “many issues” motivating the strike.

He reflected on what he thought about a handful of corporations having the final say on the creative and artistic output of an entire industry. “It’s unfortunate. The fact is a handful of corporations control almost everything in the world. So, it is not unique to our situation, obviously.

“If they could pay us nothing and get away with it, they would happily do that. We are not going to sit by silently and let them keep paying us less and less and less. That is not an option,” Andre said adding, “I don’t want to see this career become gig work. God bless Uber and Lyft drivers, but I don’t want that kind of a job.”

“The streaming business changed everything,” said

Logan, a writer in New York. “They introduced a new model, they make a lot of money off of it, and we’re footing the bill.”

Michelle, another writer in California, explained that under the current contract, “People are having to take second jobs.”

While workers are taking on extra jobs to make ends meet, Michelle said, “For all the big corporations, it is working for them ... all of the CEOs and the businesses, the money they made, it’s just gross, honestly.”

Like many writers, Michelle does not currently have medical insurance.

“I sold my show to Netflix, and I was able to live for a couple of years. Then COVID-19 happened, which obviously affected everybody. I went from having health insurance to being dropped, and now I can’t get back because now [the strike] is happening. So for writers you can go from very high to very low, quite quickly. It is not a lot of stability.

“I need another \$4,000 just to get my health insurance back, and I can’t get it back until January because of [the strike]. So that is really frustrating that people have to go through this when these people have millions and I have to struggle just to make that \$4,000, it just doesn’t make sense.

“There is a lot of greed,” she added, “but that is across the board in every industry. We see it here in ours for sure.”

Pointing to the fact that workers are confronting the same class enemy in the US and internationally, Michelle added, “Look, we are seeing what is happening in France too. We are tired, but we have to do what we can do. We are going to withhold our labor and send a message and see how long that takes.”

Commenting on the need for workers to organize their struggles, she added, “You know people will talk negatively about social media, but it really has done an amazing thing where I am able to know what is happening around the world. And it is really important that I know, but that is how we stand in unity.

“It’s not just this little box. It’s everywhere.”

Asked by a WSWS reporter what she would write about if the decision was not left in the hands of a corporation or their shareholders, Michelle replied, “I would write on the immigrant experience, I think that it shows that the sense of entitlement that someone feels when they point to someone else and say they are

‘other’ or ‘less than.’ When I was growing up my parents were made to feel like they were ‘less than,’ and I saw how people treated them because they didn’t speak the language and didn’t make a lot of money.”

Speaking on the role of the artist she added, “Look, there is entertainment that is out there and it exists just to entertain.” However, “creative people are sensitive people, that’s why we do what we do. So, we are pulling from a very real place, and when we are able to talk about these television shows and films that have a message in there, there is a reason for that. The writer is pulling from somewhere and trying to connect a message.

“I am very, very big on the fact that when people try and tell writers to, ‘Be quiet, you are just a writer,’ they don’t understand we are the people that see what is going on. We are them.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact