

The social, cultural and historical significance of the US television and film writers strike

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The strike by 11,000 US television and film writers, which began on Tuesday, is at once part of a general upsurge in the class struggle, a challenge to the stranglehold of the conglomerates over film and television production and a confrontation with the Democratic Party establishment that dominates Hollywood.

The writers in the US confront some of the largest and most ruthless conglomerates in the world, which are determined to eliminate jobs and reduce costs at the expense of television and film workers. Under the profit system, artificial intelligence and other technologies, which have a vast potential to enrich life, will be used to destroy workers' living standards and conditions.

This has already been the experience with streaming. The Writers Guild of America (WGA) acknowledges that the companies "have leveraged the streaming transition to underpay writers, creating more precarious, lower-paid models for writers' work." While the companies have been raking in billions, median weekly writer-producer pay has declined by 23 percent over the past decade, adjusted for inflation.

The writers are demanding better compensation from companies and their executives. Amazon (as of 2018 ranked eighth on the Fortune 500 list) had revenue in 2022 of \$514 billion, Disney (number 53 on the 2022 Fortune 500) had revenue last year of \$83 billion, NBCUniversal \$39 billion, Netflix \$32 billion and so forth.

These giant corporations are themselves under relentless pressure from Wall Street to further increase profit margins. Banks and investors are, in particular, demanding that the media companies find a way to increase returns from streaming services.

The Wall Street analysis firm MoffettNathanson commented earlier this year that "Investors and executives have accepted that streaming is, in fact, not a good business—at least not compared to what came before." To make it a "good business" requires increasing the exploitation of all workers involved, including, in particular, writers.

In other words, writers are confronted with the fact that they face the same ruthless assault on their jobs and living conditions as all sections of the working class, in the US and internationally. The greed of media executives, of which there is plenty, is secondary to the imperatives of the capitalist profit system.

The writers have a combative history. This is their seventh strike, including the 100-day strike in 2007-08, extensively covered by the WSWs. Most of those strikes have lasted for months.

The economic demands of the strikers are of immense importance. However, the struggle for those demands raises deeper social, political, cultural and historical issues.

Television and film production is economically and culturally central to American capitalism, as well as its image and reputation abroad. The battle between the writers and the entertainment firms is also a struggle over the content of cultural life. Figures such as the Murdoch family of Fox, whom writers have depicted scathingly on the series *Succession*, and their counterparts throughout the industry exercise strict control over what the US and global population sees on its television and movie screens.

The current conflict is part of an ongoing war between the writers and the studios and networks that has been going on for nearly a century. The Screen Writers Guild (a forerunner of the Writers Guild of America West and East) was founded in 1933 in response to the ruthless, predatory actions of the Hollywood studios, including the 50 percent wage cut they imposed in March of that year.

Unionization among the writers was ferociously opposed by the studio heads, in part because they considered it an intolerable interference with their right to dictate content. During the Red Scare in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the writers were the particular target of the anticommunist witch-hunters.

The American political establishment was particularly sensitive to the socially conscious films produced from the late 1930s onward. The Screen Writers Guild came under attack by the House Un-American Activities Committee

(HUAC) beginning in 1940. HUAC held two rounds of hearings, in 1947 and 1951-53, which resulted in the blacklisting of hundreds and the cowardly capitulation of others. In 1952, the Screen Writers Guild—among whose founders were three future members of the Hollywood Ten of blacklist fame—authorized the movie studios to “omit from the screen” the names of any individuals who had failed to “clear themselves” before Congress.

A conflict between the writers and the corporations always contains within it the elements of a struggle for artistic freedom against big business domination and the fight for social criticism against conformism, nationalism and militarism.

The major Hollywood companies have been increasingly integrated with the state, the Pentagon and the CIA. A recent documentary, “Theaters of War: How the Pentagon and the CIA took Hollywood,” showed how the military and intelligence agencies have exercised direct editorial control over more than 2,500 film and television productions over the past two decades.

The Biden administration’s present war drive against Russia and China requires the further harnessing of the entire entertainment industry to the needs of imperialism. Censorship of books and ideas is already sweeping the US. This cannot be separated from the broader assault on democratic rights. Julian Assange remains in prison for revealing the truth of US war crimes, a fate that, if the ruling class has its way, will be used against all those who expose the reality of social and political life.

There is serious television and film writing occurring today. The terrible decay and near disintegration of American society, which daily results in mass shootings and other anti-social atrocities, is impressing itself on the more thoughtful writers. But the profit demands and ideological needs of the corporations predominate. If artistic freedom really existed, what stories would the writers tell? What sorts of dramas would they make out of their own situation? What conflicts and contradictions would they have to take up in treating the present strike?

The ruling class has engaged in a decades-long campaign to delegitimize any form of genuine, left-wing thinking, to exclude entirely any narrative that goes beyond tepid liberalism. The poisonous Democratic Party and pseudo-left narrative, according to which race and gender are everything in America, is promoted relentlessly. A regime of self-censorship is imposed, with writers generally having to sneak into their texts even the most veiled criticism of capitalism.

Rupert Murdoch was not wrong during the 2007-08 strike in seeing the conflict as a serious threat to his business and social interests. Murdoch complained that while the 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.”

To win their demands in this strike, writers have to take matters into their own hands, uniting their struggle with those of other sections of the working class, in the entertainment industry and beyond. This includes the development of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, which is tied to the Democratic Party and therefore the ruling class. WGA leaders at a rally on Wednesday declared that the “White House is behind us.” This is a lie that will undermine the struggle of striking workers against the giant corporations and the ruling class political establishment that stands behind it.

Above all, it is necessary to connect the strike and the conditions that writers face to the struggles of the entire working class, which are unfolding throughout the world. France has entered into a revolutionary crisis with the majority of the population in favor of a general strike to bring down the hated Macron government. Major strikes are roiling in country after country: the UK, Germany, Sri Lanka and Canada.

In the US, there have been significant strikes this year of academic workers, only the initial expression of a social explosion. In California alone, there are developing struggles of educators, dock workers and logistics workers.

A serious study of history and politics, and on this basis an orientation to the development of a socialist movement in the working class, is required for writers to both understand their own struggle and to understand society, which is necessary to create art of genuine and enduring value.



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