

TV and film corporations use US writers strike to threaten mass firings

Jacob Crosse, Marc Wells
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For the fourth day in a row, thousands of writers in the Writers Guild of America (WGA) picketed in front of major studios in Los Angeles and New York, in the process forcing the cancellation of many television shows. This is the first strike by the Hollywood and New York writers since the 100-day strike in 2007-2008 and is part of a global wave of class struggle that has dominated the first five months of 2023.

The writers strike, which began this past Tuesday, pits some 11,000 members of the WGA against some of the largest multinational corporations on the planet, including Amazon, Fox and Disney. Writers are not only on strike to reverse a steady decline in their living standards, they are also engaged in a struggle over which class, and in whose interests, the films and television programs billions of people around the world watch will be created.

That the strike is already causing concern among shareholders and executives was reflected in letters sent by the legal departments of some of the studios earlier this week. On Friday, industry publications *Deadline* and *The Hollywood Reporter* reported that two of the largest studios, Warner Bros. Discovery and Disney, had sent threatening letters to “showrunners” demanding they cross the picket line and continue to work. A showrunner is the primary creative person or persons, almost always a writer, often an executive producer, who leads a project.

For “WGA members who are active showrunners,” wrote *Deadline*, “some of the studios want to make damn sure they show up for work.”

In a May 2 letter sent by Warner Bros. Discovery to showrunners and executive producers, the studio wrote that even if a worker is a WGA member, “we believe certain services, such as participating in the cast process and /or contributing to non-writing production, and post-production work are clear examples of non-WGA required services that should continue to be rendered during this time.”

“If you fail to provide contracted services due to the strike, HBO/HBO Max will not be obliged to continue your salary,” Warner Bros. Discovery lawyers wrote.

Making clear that the companies plan to use the strike as a pretext to lay off staff, even if they follow their contract *and* scab on the strike, the letter warned: “Further, if production is interrupted by the strike, even if you offer to continue to work, HBO/HBO Max will not be obliged to continue your salary, nor the salary of the cast and crew.”

Similarly, Disney wrote in a May 3 email to showrunners and writer-producers, “Studio intends to stay in production during the WGA strike and we are legally entitled to do so.” Citing an anonymous “insider,” *Deadline* reported, “Everyone but Netflix has sent one it seems,” while an unnamed executive told the publication: “All the studios are planning on sending these letters out.”

Confronted by the combined might of the studios, writers must turn to the only social force capable of bringing them to their knees: the working class. In order to avoid a repeat of the 2007-2008 strike, which ended with a company-friendly contract that has led to the current struggle, writers must develop independent rank-and-file committees. These committees, united with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), are independent of the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus and will fight to broaden the struggle, not only throughout the country but the world.

James, a writer picketing in front of the Fox Studios lot, explained to WSWS reporters, “I think that everything we are fighting for and asking for is absolutely needed. Not only for the benefit of writers, so we can make a working, a living, but also for the overall well-being of this industry, and the future of this industry moving forward.”

Asked to comment on what themes are present in his writing, James reflected, “I would say, a lot of the things I write, I write about things I care about. Things that impact my community, revolve around social justice. The great thing about television is we have the opportunity to shift culture, politics and the way people think. Television has a huge role as far as just progression in society, advancing tolerance, acceptance. Whether it is LGBTQIA rights, or civil rights or women’s rights. I think that television and

entertainment play a huge role in helping people understand the humanity of other people.”

He continued, “Classism and capitalism is always something that I think is very present. Often times we are told ... to ‘pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.’ We were born into a system that didn’t even give us boots.”

James added, “I think what is happening with the writers strike, with the studios and the writers ... I think that is a baseline of what it is. Unfortunately, it is a representation of this country. But I think in all struggles, nothing is given without a fight. You have to go out and demand it, so here we are.

“For a lot of us we just want to create. We want to make an honest and decent living being able to create the art that we want. Of course, the ownership, the control, the business side, ‘show business’ it is a totally different side.” He concluded, “I think there is a world where we can all eat and work together.”

Sam, a comedy writer, said the current system “is an existential threat for the life of writers and specifically middle class writers to make a living. The wealth in this industry is extremely stratified right now. People in charge are making a ton of money, [while] lower-level writers, especially staff writers are being hung out to dry. There are consequences to that. It makes it harder to make a living as a writer and discourages the voices that we need to tell great stories.”

Reflecting on his writing he said, “In some instances I think that the function of comedy is to speak truth to power and hold a lens to power structures. Being able to laugh at something that is powerful sort of punctures the veil around it and makes it easier to realize that those things are human. There’s a million ways to make people laugh, and one of them has been to mock the king.”

Carlos, a striking writer, explained that screenwriters are on strike because they need to create “an atmosphere where writers can support themselves again. We make the content, it feels like we should be treated as partners, not just employees that can be shed at will.”

He explained, “I think there is this feeling [the corporations/executives have] that there is always someone else that can replace us. That we are modular pieces. You can just strip us out and put someone else in there, and it is simply not true.

“There is something to expertise. There is a value to time served and people who have a particular skill.

“We are the generators of the profit. We have made that possible. It is amazing that we are so vital and so needed, and yet somehow having these skills makes us expendable. But it is amorphous to them, for the people who don’t

create. They don’t really quite understand what is required so they think anybody can do it, and it is simply not true.”

Asked what he would create if freed from the confines of the profit motive, Carlos responded, “That’s a good question. You certainly wouldn’t be writing to a ‘market place’ right? You would be writing to the people you want to reach for their edification and also for their entertainment and enjoyment.”

He added, “I write about family, I write about my family. I find that if I do that with great specificity people see themselves in that too. It’s great, that sort of collective that we tap into, it is something we are all a part of.

“If you are watching or reading something about people’s lives, who might be completely separate from yours, even if you don’t have a particular context, there is something about how—whatever they are going through, the stakes that affect them—you can still tap into and immediately relate to, because we really are all interconnected.”

A young writer, Brian, explained to WSWS reporters why he was on strike. “I have only been in the guild for a little bit over a year. If we don’t strike and get a good deal, I won’t be able to have a career in this industry. I am lucky enough to be on a broadcast show. I was talking to someone yesterday that had three TV jobs, a feature writing job, and they still had to take a survival job on top of that just to pay rent.”

He explained that for “people my age the formative events of our lives was the ’08 financial crash, and what that proved to all of us was that the system was irreparably [broken]. The only way out was to fight it. My parents’ generation that came of age in the ’80s after Reagan f*cked over the air traffic controllers, like that’s stuff we weren’t taught about until we had to force the issue.”

While Brian currently works on a reactionary program that glorifies American policing, he noted, “The script that I wrote that got me the job was about the Haymarket bombing, so while I might not be able to get it into my writing with the show I am currently on, it is something I am constantly thinking about.”



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