

Artificial intelligence and the film and television writers' strike

Kevin Reed
10 May 2023

The planned use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology by studios and networks for plot and script writing has emerged as a significant issue in the strike by television and film writers, 11,500 members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), that has now entered its second week.

The writers are demanding compensation increases, better working conditions and improved health and pension benefits. Across the board, the association of employers, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), has responded with a combination of insulting counteroffers and outright rejection of the writers' demands.

The writers' strike—a component of the growing movement of workers internationally across all industries—is against the world's most powerful capitalist media conglomerates. It involves both the methods and the content of movies and TV series that are watched in theaters, living rooms and, increasingly, on mobile devices by billions of people around the globe.

In the status of contract negotiations published on May 1, the WGA included in its list of bargaining demands, the following: “Regulate use of artificial intelligence on MBA-covered projects (projects covered by the Minimum Basic Agreement): AI can't write or rewrite literary material; can't be used as source material; and MBA-covered material can't be used to train AI.”

According to the WGA document, the response of the corporate production companies to the WGA demand is, “Rejected our proposal. Countered by offering annual meetings to discuss advancements in technology.” In other words, the employers are planning to use the technology to attack the workforce as they see fit and will let their partners in the unions

into periodic meetings to tell them what they are doing.

Media technology is very much at the center of the conflict between the writers and the producers. Since the 100-day strike in 2007-2008, in which the subject of residual compensation for writers for content released on video streaming services was discussed but left unresolved, companies such as Netflix, Hulu, Disney+ and AppleTV+ have emerged as the dominant players in the industry.

The impact on writers of content developed by streaming services has been devastating. According to a report in the Associated Press, “Streaming services' use of smaller staffs—known in the industry as ‘mini rooms’—for shorter stints has made sustained income harder to come by, the guild says. And the number of writers working at guild minimums has gone from about a third to about half in the past decade.”

Clearly, the lack of regular work for writers in the streaming space has been a means through which the production companies have increased the exploitation of the creative staff by reducing the number of hours that the workers are on the job. A recent story in *Variety* reported that the previous model employed staff writers for a television series for an average of 29 weeks, while the new model employs writers for an average of 20 weeks, a cost reduction of nearly 30 percent.

In an official statement issued on May 4, the AMPTP wrote that they want to change how writing credits are determined if a writer uses artificial intelligence, “which is complicated given AI material can't be copyrighted,” and “it's something that requires a lot more discussion.”

There are large sums of money to be secured by the studios from both cutting the number of writers and reducing their working cycles. And this is precisely the

issue at stake in the drive by the media conglomerates to deploy AI in the creative and content development process in film and television.

Over the past year, AI technology has reached a new stage of development—due to the convergence of a series of interrelated advances in computer hardware, software and networking—that, in the words of some experts, are strikingly close to human-level performance.

With millions of people using the preview release of OpenAI’s ChatGPT, especially version 4 of the core technology, the enormous potential of AI to automate many functions has been demonstrated.

At its current level, the deployment of AI in television and film writing would no doubt be associated with a general lowering in the cultural and political level of what comes out of Hollywood and the major studios. It will assist studios in excising the more socially critical writing.

At the same time, despite ongoing limitations, ChatGPT and other similar text-based generative pre-trained transformers (GPTs) have demonstrated significant accomplishments across a range of industries.

However, under capitalism, this potential is not being deployed to enhance the lives of everyone in society but instead to increase corporate profits by eliminating workers and cutting costs. The production monopolies controlling the film and TV industry are planning to use AI to attack the writers as well as other sections of the workforce.

As Sarah Myers West, Managing Director of AI Now Institute, told *Time* magazine, “It’s not so much about what AI is going to do, but what companies are going to use AI to justify.” The *Time* article says that studios could reduce the number of people in the writers’ room, with generative AI writing content that is later edited by a writer. “They could use AI to create a first draft and then bring in someone else to do a second draft. And that devalues their work by not having them do that whole process,” says Meyers West.

The position of the WGA, demanding that AI be “regulated” such that it “can’t write or rewrite literary material,” leaves intact the question of who controls the content and creative process. Rather than embracing the potential of AI tools and demanding that writers be able to reduce their volume of work with no reduction in

income, the union is proposing to wall writers off from its potential.

Instead of fighting for the mobilization of the strength of all workers in the film and television industries against the giant media corporations worth hundreds of billions of dollars, the WGA members are being forced to fight alone as the SAG-AFTRA union has ordered their 160,000 members—including actors, announcers, broadcast journalists, recording artists, singers, stunt performers, voiceover artists and others—to cross the writers’ picket lines.

The struggle against the attacks of the media monopolies on the jobs and living standards of writers can only be mounted in a direct challenge to the union apparatus that has proven again and again to be a group of agencies serving the employers and not an organization representing the interests of entertainment workers.

The issue of the use of artificial intelligence tools along with other matters of technology cannot be resolved within the framework of the capitalist system, where film and television content, the creative process and tools used by writers and other workers are owned and controlled by a handful of billionaires who have but one objective: to extract as much profit out of the workforce as possible.

It is for this reason that we urge writers and other workers in the entertainment industry begin at once to form rank-and-file committees to 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, USPS and the auto industry.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact