

Striking television and film writers speak to the WSWS: “We’re only asking for what’s fair”

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The strike by some 11,000 television and film writers working for major studios, networks and production companies entered its third week on Monday. Writers in the Writers Guild of America (WGA) are up against ruthless media giants like Amazon, Disney, Fox, Netflix, Sony and others, who are collectively represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

Conditions for writers have steadily deteriorated in recent years. Median pay for writer-producers has dropped by nearly 25 percent over the past decade, as the companies have made every effort to reduce the number of writers and the periods in which they work. Writers are striking against the increasing casualization and uncertainty of their jobs, its transformation into virtually “gig” work. They are also well aware that the corporations will push to eliminate jobs with the introduction of new artificial intelligence technologies.

The strike is playing out amidst other class battles in the US and internationally. There have been continuous protests in France over President Macron’s deeply unpopular pension reforms, and strikes by National Health Service and Royal Mail workers in Britain. In the US, there are ongoing struggles by teachers in California, and auto workers at companies like Clarios in the Midwest.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed a number of striking writers in Los Angeles.

Phil, a writer who joined the WGA in 1974 and who proudly spoke of participating in numerous strikes (1981, 1985, 1988, 2007-08 and 2023) since then, spoke about the sacrifices that workers had made in previous strikes: “It’s fairness in employment. That’s what everybody’s striking for. I know people in the ’88 strike who lost homes. Some people didn’t come back to writing. So it’s

a tough struggle, but I think there’s a lot of support for this strike, and I hope there’s just as much support all over the world for strikes that I’m not involved in, like the ones in France. I hope we can all stand together worldwide.”

Emeka, a younger writer who is just breaking into the profession, discussed how work has changed for her generation: “It’s over, the model that our parents grew up with as far as work, right? It’s not the same, where you went to work for a company at the age of 20, and worked there until you retired and got a pension. Those days are gone.

“Now with the pandemic, you have employers, politicians as well, trying to find a way to get the status quo back. They’re trying to find a way to stabilize their economy. We see companies now fighting with respect to work-from-home initiatives and things like that. They’re trying to get better stability for themselves and more control over their employees.”

Jim, a writer on *Jeopardy!*, spoke about the effect of inflation: “If we get a 5 percent raise, and inflation is 9 percent, then that’s a pay cut. It’s not just about us. If you’re forcing down wages, then that’s what’s going to happen to everyone.” He also pointed out that the Directors Guild of America (DGA) are currently in contract negotiations, and that the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) are set to begin negotiations next month.

“It’s the same thing everywhere I’ve followed the strikes against Macron in France a little. I also know that United Airlines pilots are going on strike soon, and the school workers with the SEIU just finished their strike. We’re all fighting for the same thing, at the end of the day.”

Asked about the fact that writers have been called “greedy,” Jim responded: “It’s ridiculous that [AMPTP President] Carol Lombardini said that ‘Writers are lucky to have term employment,’ and then they call *us* greedy? We’re only asking for what’s fair.”

Nearly everyone on the WGA picket-line spoke about the increasing uncertainty of being a writer. **Aaron**, a television writer with 20 years’ experience, commented, “For myself, the problem consists of a lot of shortened orders on shows where it used to be you knew that you were going to have employment for 20, 25, 30 weeks of the year, because you’d be working on a 20-episode show. Now, the orders are shrinking, and a lot of these shows are 8 to 10 episodes. So out of that 8- or 10-week room, you’re not even coming out with a script with your name on it, your name’s not on the credits of the show and you then have to be back out looking for work. And it’s hard enough to find one job a year, let alone having to string together three, four, five different short-term gigs.

“My writing partner’s health insurance lapsed and she had just re-qualified for health insurance on the last job we were on in March. [Writers only qualify for health care once they’ve worked a certain amount for the studios.] But when you have a family, not having health insurance and having to go on COBRA, which is extremely expensive, is very problematic. I’m lucky enough that my wife’s a teacher, so I can get on her insurance through her criminally underpaid profession, but at least we have good health benefits. But there are a lot of writers, myself included, in between jobs, who are having to find other jobs.”

Jovan, a writer on *For All Mankind*, spoke along the same general lines: “I’m fortunate enough to have my career going and have residuals and whatnot, but that wasn’t there before. If we had a more stable schedule then we might be paid less, but be paid for a longer time. I was staffed on a show that was only a 12-week room. And that 12 weeks lasted me for nine months, because that’s how long it took in between to try to have my reps push for me to get on another show. Sometimes, depending on the season, depending on budgets, depending on my own skill and what the other studios are looking for, I’ve averaged around eight to nine months in between jobs.”

Jovan also made points about artistic expression, and about how his own working class background shaped his views. “I think that we’re doing our audience a disservice. During the ‘70s, we had some of the best film and television come out, because they were willing to ‘go there.’ Or I should say, the writers were willing to go

there. And people were able to connect to that. It’s so hard. The last five years I’ve been in the Guild, but the majority of my life I’ve been struggling, the majority of my life I’ve been working class, the majority of my life I’ve been trying to pinch two pennies together. And to find inspiration to pull out of that experience. Well, a great story is almost as good as a wise uncle ...

“The farther I get away from it, the more I want to try to connect back to it. Because I look back on the things that I did in my life, and I had no plan, I didn’t really have an idea. If I were to tell people how I got in and how I was able to become a working writer ... if they followed that path, it probably wouldn’t work out because logically it didn’t make any sense. But, I’d have to explain, you only see the success! You didn’t see all the hard times. You didn’t see me sleeping in my car. You didn’t see me getting kicked out and having to figure out how to get a new roommate because I got evicted.”

Jovan concluded by expressing his skepticism about the official narrative on the war in Ukraine: “My thoughts on [Ukraine] are similar to what happened with the pandemic and how many people really died. It seems to me that there’s a lot going on that we don’t know. I’m very skeptical and suspicious about everything in life. Maybe that’s my upbringing...”

“I don’t really know what’s going on,” the writer went on, “but there’s something strange to me about someone like the Ukrainian president [Zelensky] showing up at the Grammys. That to me is off. I personally don’t really care for the Met Gala and things like that, but when I see those types of people show up, I keep my ears open because I’m thinking, what are these behind-the-scenes dealings? I think we need our next [journalists Bob] Woodward and [Carl] Bernstein to do a deep dive and see what’s what, and expose some reality. Unfortunately, those types of stories are being suppressed. Because that was at a time when big government and big business weren’t in bed together as much as they are today.”



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