

Hollywood's race and gender quotas, identity politics and the writers' strike

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On May 2, some 11,500 television and film writers, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), went on strike in opposition to the effort by the massive conglomerates that control the industry to reduce them essentially to “gig” workers.

Every section of the working class has a stake in the outcome of this conflict. The giant, multi-billion-dollar firms (Disney, Amazon, Apple, NBCUniversal, Sony, etc.) are determined to set an example of the writers and drive down their conditions as part of the general offensive to impose the crisis of capitalism on the backs of the working population. Moreover, what the writers create, or are not permitted to create, has an impact on the cultural level of wide layers of the population, their ability to grasp important social realities and orient themselves. Series such as *Succession*, *The Dropout*, *Dopesick* and others contribute to popular awareness and undermine illusions in the existing system.

A little over a week after the writers went on strike, on May 10, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) held a virtual town hall to discuss its new “inclusion standards” for the Best Picture category, which will come into effect in 2024.

The “inclusion standards” were first announced in September 2020. At the time, the WSWS denounced the Academy's effort to demand, in effect, that films “conform to racial and gender criteria to qualify for its Best Picture award” as a “vicious attack on artistic freedom and a step down a very sinister path.”

There is a thread firmly connecting these two events in early May, although it may not be immediately apparent.

The television and film writers, like other sections of the population once thought of as middle class, have already been substantially proletarianized. The studios and networks, in their profit drive, are attempting to create a pool of desperate writers at their beck and call, available when immediately needed, then disposed of. The questions raised by their strike confront large sections of the population.

The Writers Guild leadership, tied to the Democratic Party and the Hollywood establishment, is incapable of resisting these attacks, which require mobilizing the great power of the hundreds of thousands of workers in the industry and beyond. Writers, actors and directors need rank-and-file committees to fight for significant increases and improvements in working conditions. Political and cultural questions are also unavoidable. The chokehold of the financial oligarchy over television and film production, glaringly brought to light by the ongoing conflict, can only be shattered by the movement of the working class to reorganize society along socialist lines.

Working in a very different direction is the general obsession with race and gender, which has infected the affluent upper middle class and which finds acute expression in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' so-called inclusion standards. Identity politics operates consciously to divide the working class, pitting blacks against whites, women against men and so on, and generally to inject as much confusion and ideological poison into the atmosphere as possible. The new Academy

standards are part of a right-wing response by defenders of the status quo in the Democratic Party, the unions and the pseudo-left to the threat posed by a mass movement of the working class.

The new “inclusion” policies were the outcome of several years of intense pressure by identity politics activists, Democratic Party-aligned figures in Hollywood and media outlets such as the *New York Times*. The #OscarsSoWhite controversy, which erupted in 2016 when for the second year in a row all 20 performers nominated in the lead and supporting acting categories were white, provided a pretext for the launching of the operation.

In June 2020, AMPAS officials announced that a task force was working on the next phase of its “equity and inclusion initiative,” known as “Academy Aperture 2025.” A September 8, 2020 press release announced the new “Representation and Inclusion Standards” for the Best Picture award proposed by the task force, chaired by Academy governors DeVon Franklin (motivational speaker, preacher and producer of such immortal works as *Miracles from Heaven* and *Heaven Is for Real*) and Jim Gianopulos (a multi-millionaire and chairman and CEO of Paramount Pictures at the time).

To be deemed eligible for the Best Picture award at the 2024 Academy Awards, a movie will have to meet two out of four standards (A through D). The standards are both foul and absurd.

To fulfill “Standard A,” for example, a film must meet one of the following criteria:

- At least one of the lead actors or significant supporting actors is Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, Black/African American, Indigenous/Native American/Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern/North African, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander or from another “underrepresented race or ethnicity.”
- At least 30 percent of all actors in secondary and more minor roles are from at least two of the following underrepresented groups: “Women, racial or ethnic group, LGBTQ+ or people with cognitive or physical disabilities, or who are deaf or hard of hearing.”
- “The main storyline(s), theme or narrative of the film is centered on an underrepresented group(s).”

“Standard B” mandates that a certain number of “creative leadership positions and department heads” come from the aforesaid “underrepresented groups.” It would require that at least 30 percent of the film's crew is from the same groups. “Standard C” concerns “industry access and opportunities,” including the provision of paid apprenticeships or internships for women and members of racial or ethnic groups, and “Standard D” requires a given studio and/or film group to have “multiple in-house senior executives” from the various “underrepresented groups... on their marketing, publicity, and/or distribution teams.”

At the May 10 town hall, according to *Deadline*, Academy CEO Bill Kramer “insisted that the standards would not prove restrictive to filmmakers.” Kramer and his associates also noted “that all of the last year's Best Picture nominees would have qualified but didn't say under

which of the four standards various films met their requirements.”

Furthermore, *Deadline* reported that although “the new standards have intimidated some, the Academy has been assuring members they are not meant to mess with the creative process given the variety of ways a film can still be eligible for the top award on Oscar night.”

We are not reassured in the least. As the WSWS commented in 2016, the underlying premise of this sort of effort is that “artwork should be categorized and presumably appreciated according to whether it represents a male or female, black or white perspective.” Whether they liked it or not, we warned, such forces were setting up this basic standard: “women gain more from art produced by women, Jews from work created by Jews, African-Americans from ‘African-American art,’ etc.”

Assuming that artistic perspective is thoroughly framed by race or gender, the AMPAS bureaucrats and their advisers elevate such matters to the level of a worldview. In ideological terms, in their obsession with race in particular, such views have been identified historically with the far right.

Such an approach, in fact, is death to art, which requires that the artist ignore external compulsions of every kind and be true to him or herself. The AMPAS proposals are a form of petty bourgeois, identity politics censorship, a new version of the notorious Motion Picture Production Code (the Hays Code), which tyrannized over filmmaking for more than three decades.

In opposing this pernicious effort, film artists might take inspiration from the youthful Karl Marx’s rejoinder in 1842 to the instructions of the Prussian censor, who also insisted that “the censorship should not prevent serious and modest investigation of truth.” Marx asked rhetorically, “Is it not the first duty of the seeker after truth to aim directly at the truth, without looking to the right or left? Will I not forget the essence of the matter, if I am obliged not to forget to state it in the prescribed form?”

He went on, “The law permits me to write, only I must write in a style that is not *mine*! I may show my spiritual countenance, but I must first set it in the *prescribed folds*! What man of honour will not blush at this presumption...?”

Indeed, what man or woman of honor would not blush at such presumption...?

The claim that the Academy’s initiative involves “inclusion” and “diversity” in any meaningful sense is fraudulent. On the contrary, bringing in a portion of already affluent African Americans and females will not change the social character of American film and television in the least.

Indeed, one of the purposes of the new standards is to fix the focus of writers, directors, producers and actors on personal identity as the question of questions and to divert attention from the burning problems of war, poverty, pandemic and the threat of dictatorship.

The indifference and hostility of the wealthy caste that rules the entertainment industry to the conditions and interests of the working population can only be countered by a broad movement directed against the profit system. The progress of television and film art, the accurate and complex representation of life, which only now and again makes itself felt at present, is bound up with the development of the class struggle.

What is the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences? Whose social interests does it represent?

Observant commentators agree that the origins of the “Academy” lie in inverse proportion to its high-flown and pretentious name. It emerged as a sordid, underhanded effort in the late 1920s, spearheaded by Louis B. Mayer, the head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and the most powerful Hollywood executive, to subvert the unionization of film workers. The

establishment of a corporatist entity, with different branches, would—Mayer and the others hoped—induce writers and others to feel they were part of the industry and not make any unreasonable demands.

As for the Academy Awards ceremony itself, Mayer later cynically commented, “I found that the best way to handle [filmmakers] was to hang medals all over them... If I got them cups and awards they’d kill themselves to produce what I wanted. That’s why the Academy Award was created.”

Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, in their valuable *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-60*, pointedly explained that the studio owners in 1927, “sensing a new era of labor militancy, threw down one of management’s most dog-eared trumps—a company-formed union called the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.” This outfit, they wrote, “managed to forestall serious labor organizing among the Hollywood artists for over five years. Once the changes wrought by the sound revolution and the early, worst, years of the Depression ceased to dislodge and frighten the movie artists, however, the Academy’s role as an agency of studio management became obvious to all. Its acquiescence in a series of pay cuts and layoffs in the late twenties and early thirties left the talented personnel helpless before the economizing of the producers.”

In *The Hollywood Writers’ Wars*, Nancy Lynn Schwartz corroborated this account. She referred to the exclusive dinner at which MGM’s Mayer (in the 1930s, the highest paid individual in the US) “harangued his guests, convincing them that an organization such as the Academy would be far preferable to any craft organization that was antagonistic toward the producers. So the Academy was born ...”

Schwartz further noted that for a number of years everything “seemed safe and secure in the little kingdom,” until the studios imposed the massive wage cuts during the Depression. When the writers subsequently began to seriously organize, the “Academy, of course, couldn’t understand why the writers would want to organize when there was writer representation in the Academy. But as it was so precisely put in a statement attributed by some to [writer] Dorothy Parker: ‘Looking to the Academy for representation was like trying to get laid in your mother’s house. Somebody was always in the parlor, watching.’”

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, during the purges of Communist Party and other left-wing actors, writers and directors, the Academy played a rotten and cowardly role. As late as 1957, on the eve of the collapse of the blacklist, the AMPAS passed a by-law decreeing that no one who had invoked his or her Fifth Amendment rights (against self-incrimination) in front of the witch-hunting House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) could receive an Academy Award. It had also stripped award eligibility from anyone who had been a member of the Communist Party. In 1999, the Academy despicably went out of its way to bestow an honorary award on arch-informer, director Elia Kazan.

If this “company-formed union,” this disreputable, moth-eaten vehicle of the studios, is energetically and emphatically pursuing racial and gender politics, it has an excellent *class* reason to do so. In the face of such menacing developments as the writers’ strike, and the latter is only an opening shot, the powers that be in Hollywood and Wall Street are turning campaigns for “inclusion” and “diversity” into one of their lines of defense. Writers and others need to take note.



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