

Striking television and film writers rally in New York City

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On Tuesday, as the Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike ended its third week, picketing writers and supporters rallied across the street from NBC headquarters at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, known as “30 Rock,” in midtown Manhattan. The rally attracted more than 1,000 people, the largest event of the strike in New York so far, including WGA members, as well as supporters from the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and others.

A host of celebrities (Steve Earle, Wanda Sykes, Susan Sarandon and more), various union officials and figures associated with both the entertainment industry and the Democratic Party (Al Franken, Cynthia Nixon, Kal Penn) were on hand. Franken, Nixon and New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, who campaigned to be the Democrats’ New York gubernatorial candidate in 2022, but lost, addressed the rally.

The union officials and Democrats offered demagogic denunciations of corporate greed and promised “support” and “solidarity.” The promises are worth less than nothing. The Democratic Party led by the Biden administration is an anti-working class party of war and Wall Street, which banned a strike by railroad workers last year. If the writers or any other section of workers got in the way of American capitalism’s “national interests,” they would receive the same brutal treatment.

The writers are battling against some of the largest multinational corporations on the planet, grouped together into the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), including Amazon, Walt Disney, NBCUniversal and Warner Bros. Discovery. These giants, which rake in tens or even hundreds of billions of dollars a year, are seeking to squeeze even more profit from the writers, already suffering from tenuous employment and unpredictable incomes, by turning them in effect into

“gig” workers and threatening to replace them to an ever greater extent with artificial intelligence (AI).

WSWS reporters spoke with writers and supporters at the rally about the wider context of the strike and the need to unite all workers in a common struggle against the increasingly difficult situation they face.

Quentin, a television comedy writer, told a WSWS reporter, “I am in favor of the pan-union thing, uniting with more workers. Everyone is in the same boat with how things are going. There needs to be more solidarity for all workers. Looking back in history, business has gained so much control since the Reagan Revolution.”

The WSWS reporter discussed how that situation came to be, the role of the unions in the worsening conditions for workers, the need to form rank-and-file committees as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We asked Quentin what he thought was the major issue in the strike.

“They want to use AI [artificial intelligence] to replace us,” he replied. “AI in the hands of writers and workers can be used to help us. Writers use AI to help germinate other ideas. In the future, it will become a new tool to optimize our work. But the businesses are short-sighted. They are only interested in short-term gains.”

He continued, “The model of work they want actually sacrifices even their future. They create small rooms of fewer writers. They do not want writers in production and post-production. They are cutting off the pipeline to bring in and develop younger writers. There is a need for studios to include more voices. For now, our perspective is we need to have more writers in the room. People are saying, ‘This strike is to save the studio from themselves.’”

The WSWS reporter pointed out the contradiction between workers providing their labor to businesses that exploit them ever more brutally for profit while workers have the power to put an end to capitalism and take

control of society for the good of all.

“I would consider myself a democratic socialist,” Quentin said. “That means I think there needs to be protection for citizens, there should be a safety net. But everything is being slashed. We are in late-stage capitalism. It is scary. We are at an inflection point. I am 36 years old and have already seen how they had to bail out the corporations three times—2001, 2008 and 2020. We need more support. What if the bailouts were extended to the mainstream of society?”

Tommaso, an IATSE member, was at the rally to support the writers. “I work in live television and motion pictures building sets,” he explained. “We are in a continuous struggle to spread the wealth, to have residuals. The struggle is to stay together. A year and a half ago we in IATSE had our fight, but we have not demanded residuals yet. The problem is pay levels do not go up. We have to raise the minimum wage base.”

Kate is a freelance writer while still a college student. “I go to Boston University and, while not part of the union, I want to support them. It is what I hope to do in the future. It is also for the future of people like me. I am interested in television.” Asked if she thought socialism was needed for the future, she responded, “Socialism is better than the mainstream parties.”

A woman wearing a WGA t-shirt was asked while taking a WWS leaflet how she thought the strike was going. “This strike is strong because in the entertainment industry we have one of the most active of memberships. There is a layer of workers aroused. Now we are looking for unity with SAG-AFTRA and the Directors Guild,” whose contracts expire June 30.

In contrast with the determination and political openness expressed by the pickets, the WGA negotiating committee is pushing a statement, published the previous week and distributed to its members, titled “The Cost of Settling.” It pleads with the studios on the grounds that accepting a contract with the union would be cheaper than a continuing strike. It asserts that “the studios are risking significant continued disruption in the coming weeks and months that would far outweigh the costs of settling.”

The purpose of this argument is to promote illusions among workers that the owners can be “reasonable.” This, in turn, paves the way for the union to push for workers to accept “compromises” in order to reach an illusory “middle ground” that the studios can accept. The mega-corporations against which the screenwriters are battling are not interested in saving a few dollars in the short term. They, and the entire capitalist class, are

engaged in an existential struggle to defend their system, presently descending into extreme crisis, by whatever means necessary. The result increasingly is uncompromising class war.

The screenwriters must stand firm and raise demands that address their vital needs and interests. To accomplish this, they must beware not only of the treachery of the AFL-CIO unions, who have sold out strike after strike for decades, and the Democratic Party politicians with whom they are allied, but also many of their “progressive” upper-middle class “friends.”

As noted above, the latter were present en masse at Tuesday’s rally, including Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner, also a screenwriter, and others who style themselves as supporters of the strike. Kushner and company were apparently instrumental in successfully lobbying the Guild to exempt the upcoming Tony Awards ceremony from being shut down by strikers, based on the contention that Broadway theater had been badly affected by the pandemic and had not yet recovered. As a result, the WGA officials agreed not to picket the ceremony provided it did not use a written script.

This is a capitulation and reveals an utterly wrongheaded perspective, that the writers should do everything in their power not to “offend” businesses like the Broadway theaters and New York City’s officialdom in general. In fact, no section of the working class has ever won anything by such timidity. It only encourages the AMPTP, a ruthless group of companies, which will not stop at anything to impose a rotten contract. The decision on the Tonys should be reversed and the writers must do everything in their power to shut down such events.

As the strike goes forward, the WGA will give in more and more. It is part of the process of wearing down and demoralizing the writers. The companies count on the eventual exhaustion of the writers, as in 2007-08, so they will be forced to accept pennies and open the door for more job destruction and precarious employment.

Workers interested in setting up rank-and-file committees, in fighting for the radical transformation of society to one based on human need, not private profit, should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today.



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