

San Francisco Chronicle writers hold lunch-hour picket to protest low wages

Jesus Ugarte
25 May 2023

A group of approximately 40 writers from the *San Francisco Chronicle* picketed outside the newspaper headquarters in downtown San Francisco during their lunch hour Tuesday afternoon. The workers, under the San Francisco Chronicle Guild (SFCG) union, have been engaged in contract negotiations for nearly two years with Hearst Communications, the parent company that owns the *SF Chronicle*, with negotiations commencing in July of the previous year and the contract expiring months ago.

Writers at the *Chronicle*, the most prestigious newspaper in Northern California, face unlivable salaries. Current starting salaries are only \$62,000 per year, with the company proposing an increase to \$73,000 per year. Average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in San Francisco is \$3,000 per month, according to real estate website Zumper.com. In other words, under the company's proposal, a starting worker would spend 49 percent of their pre-tax income on rent, instead of the current 58 percent. Workers are also demanding increases in paid parental leave, which is only five weeks for those working outside the San Francisco Bay Area.

The walk-out by *Chronicle* workers arrives at a critical moment in the broader struggle for fair wages and labor rights. It resonates with the ongoing battle waged by approximately 11,500 Hollywood writers, who are represented by the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and have been on strike since May 2, fighting for fair wages and improved working conditions. Furthermore, on Wednesday, a remarkable 94 percent majority of 230 writers at *The Insider* in New York voted in favor of authorizing strike action. These collective actions across different sectors of the workforce demonstrate a growing wave of dissent against exploitative practices

and a rejection of the prioritization of profit over human need.

The picket by *Chronicle* writers highlights both the persistent challenges faced by the workers amid soaring inflation, and the pernicious role of the union, which is working to contain the writers to isolated stunt actions.

The position of *Chronicle* writers has steadily eroded in recent years. Nearly two dozen employees, a substantial fraction of the total workforce, have left in the past two years due to the stagnant wages. Many have been forced to relocate due to the increasingly unaffordable circumstances.

Despite these hardships, the union's demands are completely inadequate. The SFCG has put forth a request for a meager 1 percent increase per worker for each additional year worked under the new contract, in addition to the 2.25 percent annual merit-based raise offered by Hearst. Even under the assumption that workers will meet the arbitrary merit criteria established by the company, this proposal would only result in a paltry annual increase of 3.25 percent, barely exceeding half the current rate of inflation. Ultimately, this would lead to a substantial net reduction of over 3 percent in workers' wages on an annual basis.

The lunch-out, which did not actually stop operations at the newspaper, is the latest installment in a recurring pattern that has unfolded at the *Chronicle* over the past several years. Back in August 2013, after 14 months of one-sided negotiations and the involvement of a federal mediator, the union brought forth a five-year contract for ratification by the workers.

The resulting agreement was a giveaway to the company. It gutted the worker-administered Taft-Hartley health plan and forced employees into the Hearst Corporation benefits plan, which resulted in

higher out-of-pocket health care expenses. Worst of all, the contract offered a paltry 7.7 percent salary increase over its duration, which, when accounting for inflation of 9.7 percent during the same period, resulted in an actual reduction in wages. In the words of SFCG bargaining team member Carl Hall, workers accepted the contract only “with great reluctance.”

In 2018, the next act played out, with another 14 months of negotiations culminating in the presentation of a similarly demeaning contract to the workers by the union. This time, a significant change was introduced: the elimination of raises tied to the cost of living. Instead, the contract introduced a “raise pool” equivalent to 2 percent of the payroll, which would then be distributed among workers depending on merit.

Although the SFCG portrayed the potential raises as ranging from 0 to 5 percent, this provision effectively guaranteed an overall 2 percent cap on raises across the company, while pitting workers against each other in a zero-sum game. Furthermore, workers denounced the merit-based system, which, in some cases, was linked to unrealistic goals of achieving a “pie-in-the-sky 20 percent readership increase.” Once again, union officials went on the record to say that the contract was “not what the Guild wanted,” but since the company made it a sticking point, they agreed to give this merit-based system “a try.”

This sequence of ever worsening contracts only serves to underscore the systematic erosion of workers’ rights and the ongoing exploitation within the media industry. The *Chronicle*’s management, backed by its parent company Hearst, has consistently prioritized cost-cutting measures and profit margins over the wellbeing and fair compensation of its workforce. Last February, Hearst CEO Steven Swartz reported the company had seen “record results” in 2022, with \$11.9 billion in total revenue.

The relentless push for merit-based systems and wage caps only deepens the divisions among employees and undermines worker unity. Furthermore, the ongoing exodus of local writers threatens the quality and extent of local news coverage.

The closure of the Ohio-based 150-year-old *Vindicator* newspaper in 2019 is a particularly stark example of this dynamic when taken to its final consequences. As newspapers cut back on staff, important local developments will go unreported. As a

result, the public will remain increasingly unaware of the social crimes perpetrated daily through the defunding of public education, health care, and other vital social services.

The struggles faced by *Chronicle* writers, alongside the working class at large, underscore the urgent need for workers to unite in solidarity while rejecting the straitjacket imposed by the union bureaucracies and the Democratic party. Neither the SFCG, its parent Communication Workers of America (CWA), or the WGA have made any attempt to link the current struggles in their public messaging on their websites or social media, let alone discuss actual joint action. In fact, the CWA website does not even mention the SFCG picket on its own website at the time of this writing.

The fight for fair wages, dignified living conditions and economic justice is not confined to one industry or one country—it is an international struggle that transcends borders.

The austerity facing *Chronicle* workers is intertwined with the Democratic Party-led drive to escalate the war in Ukraine through expenditures of tens of billions of dollars, paid for in various forms through attacks on workers’ living standards, including inflation and cuts to social services. As is always the case in war, the ruling class will seek to use the press to sell their wars to the public.

We call on *Chronicle* writers to form a rank-and-file committee, independent of the SFCG, the CWA and the Democratic Party they serve. This committee, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers, should make every effort to connect with striking screenwriters, as well as Bay Area educators and health care workers, particularly Oakland Unified teachers, who struck this month against savage austerity. *Chronicle* writers should draw up a list of demands based on what workers need to conduct high-quality journalism while leading dignified lives, irrespective of what the company says it can afford.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact