As US film and television writers strike enters second month, union officials organize “joint stab in the back”

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Film and television workers in the Writers Guild of America (WGA) are entering their second month of a strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which represents major film and television studios and networks.

The contracts of the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) expire June 30, but no union official will raise the possibility of a united walkout, shutting down much of the industry.

On the contrary, the only concern of the frightened union officials is to see that the various contracts are signed as quickly as possible, leaving the striking writers isolated.

Under the peculiar system of Hollywood labor negotiations, the DGA and AMPTP began talks three weeks ago and because negotiations between SAG-AFTRA and the same management organization are scheduled to open June 7, this is the last week of DGA-AMPTP talks.

So, on Wednesday, the WGA, along with SAG-AFTRA, IATSE, Teamsters Local 399, Hollywood Basic Crafts and the Department for Professional Employees (an AFL-CIO coalition of 24 unions and 4 million professionals and technicians) signed what they called a “joint statement of solidarity” with the DGA.

It is no such thing. It is, in fact, a “joint stab in the back,” not only of the writers, but every section of film and television industry workers.

The statement implores the AMPTP “to immediately negotiate a fair agreement that addresses the Directors Guild of America’s unique priorities in good faith.” What can that possibly mean? Instead of making plans to mobilize the entire workforce against the predatory companies, the unions are appealing to the employers to help them out by weakening, dividing and isolating their own memberships. This is a public and scandalous case of sabotage.

There is in fact the danger of a repeat of the 2007-08 WGA strike, when the DGA closed a deal with the AMPTP in the midst of the writers’ 100-day walkout. The action weakened the writers’ momentum, isolated them, and ultimately contributed to the strike’s defeat. Many of the outstanding issues today, especially on the question of residuals, stem from that loss.

It would be difficult to make a stronger case for the building of rank-and-file committees, in opposition to the highly paid bureaucrats and their apparatuses, in every corner of the film and television world than these various officials have now made themselves. The struggle of tens of thousands of workers, including writers, must be taken out of the hands of these saboteurs.

Writers on the daily picket lines evince different thoughts and attitudes. There is, of course, political confusion, but the writers gravitate instinctively toward the notion of united action and a determined stance against the entire corporate set-up. The vast salaries and profits of the company executives (and enormous incomes of some union officials) have not escaped their notice.

The strikers reveal an increasingly politicized tone, a militant desire to expand the fight internationally and not just for immediate economic demands. Many writers also show a concern about the future of art, culture and entertainment in a rapidly changing industry, where artificial intelligence (AI) under the control of massive global firms would replace writers and further lower the cultural and socio-political level.

Speaking with WSWS reporters in front of the Warner Bros studios, Marc, a genre writer, expressed great concern over the future of AI: “AI seems to be a lightning rod by which everybody begins to understand how this would affect them. We’ve all seen movies that tell stories of technology run unchecked. Now’s the time to stick our heels in the ground and say, we need to have better control over this, we need to have better standards for it, we need to have more regulation of it.”

He went on: “Given the enormous amount of profit that these companies make off of the blueprint that we provide, and they can’t do anything without that, we feel that the time has come to sit down and talk about it.”

Marc reflected on the vulnerability and power of the writer: “I think that everybody here who’s a writer is broken in some way. In that, he or she is a perfectly functional creative person. Everybody should be able to find ways to transform those

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breaks into beauty."

He also offered words on human solidarity, the artistic process and its motivations: "We have more things in common than we have separating us. What's different is the way we view and treat those common things in our lives. What we choose to keep sacred and preserve can be different depending on what we're coming from. But we all want life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

"We all want shelter and food," Marc continued, "and to be able to care for our loved ones. Those are things that transcend any differences among us. For me, making art can either help people feel better about themselves, can give them a momentary respite from the world they live in or potentially change hearts and minds about ways we can achieve the things we all want."

In contrast with the glamorous image of Hollywood celebrities propagated by the media, living standards for writers have declined, especially as a consequence of dwindling residuals from streaming services. A writer speaking anonymously shared with the WSWS: "A lot of writers are not seeing the residuals anymore, their livelihood, what they worked so hard for. Big-time, award-winning, "badass" writers, people who have really thought deep and worked hard on this stuff, not getting what they deserve, it's just wrenching. No! We will not ... we cannot stand for it."

The writer reflected on the nature of the struggle: "What we're doing is facing that class struggle, that class war."

"We can't live without each other," he went on. "Who am I without my teachers, who am I without people who clothe and feed me? And conversely, when I make art, who's my audience if not everyone in the world? Somebody out there from a different background that I don't expect will feel moved, will feel like something in life matters, that they are heard, that they're represented."

He articulated his disdain for the ruling class: "We're still not getting rid of the upper-class bourgeoisie problem. The damn parasite that lives above us continues to evolve." He expressed a desire to "start crossing national borders and having discussions, to see not just where we are currently with the American entertainment problems, but getting across to other people, other members of this larger human community and finding ways to have ideally larger strikes, larger movements."

Concerns about the drive to world war arose in the conversation: "It was always about some sort of resource gain for certain individuals or groups. What bums me out about Ukraine is as much as I want to be free from imperialism, they're still being pawned in their own way. We have to break through the national boundaries of flags and lines and instead keep focusing on who we are as people. The ruling class will work together with others that are traditionally considered enemies to keep the lower classes down."

Furthermore, "Our challenge truly is to dispel the myth spread by the ruling class that there are differences between us, that some people deserve more than others. We had the freaking UK coronation recently. The whole world turned its eyes at someone who basically from birth was just given a great deal of money to be a figurehead."

The income of the WGA officialdom came up in the discussion. WGA West Executive Director David Young, now on medical leave, took home $897,371 in 2022: "I do feel like they shouldn't be making so much money, frankly, when everyone else in the rank and file is still fighting like they are."

Thuan, an agent with the Agency for the Performing Arts (APA), had joined the Warner Bros. pickets in support of writers. "I'm supporting my clients. This is a life and death situation. If we don't change things now, then careers will be destroyed in the future. Writers have families, they have mortgages, they have a life to live."

He put it in stark terms: "I would just pose it like this: are we willing to compromise on what you think is the future of your life? Or are you going to stand on the hill and die for what you believe in? And that goes beyond simply a paycheck sometimes. It is about setting up the future appropriately."

As an insider, he offered a glimpse into how the studios work: "There is the matter of the conglomerates not opening up their books and not giving us the numbers. So even to us, 'insiders' that aren't at studios, they can hand us whatever data they want to. It doesn't matter at the end of the day because we can't verify, and there is no transparency."

Thuan reaffirmed his support to the writers, concluding: "Agents are nothing without their clients, and I am here to fight for my clients, to get them jobs, to sell their shows, to negotiate their deals, and get them the best kind of compensation for their work. And so even now, as they fight on a more macro level, with the Guild versus the studios, it's the same thing, full support for the writers."

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