

After five weeks of the writers' strike: What are the critical social and political issues?

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After five weeks on strike, many television and film writers recognize they are engaged in an economic, political and cultural battle with the capitalist status quo.

One of the responsibilities of the serious writer is to go beyond momentary appearances, to get at the real motives of individuals and groups behind their public motives. What would such a writer make of the cast of characters involved in the present conflict?

* The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), representing the major film studios, television networks and streaming services, having rejected the Writers Guild of America (WGA) contract proposals out of hand, maintains for the most part a haughty, thuggish silence. The AMPTP lets its vast wealth and corporate power speak for it. Industry executives rely at this point on the WGA and the other unions to wear down the strikers over the course of weeks and months and eventually force them back to work, on the AMPTP's terms.

* For its part, the Writers Guild leadership asserts that the conglomerates "have made billions in profit off writers' work" and that the companies "have broken this business," but after describing the state of war that exists between the giant firms and the writers, the Guild pursues an entirely bankrupt strategy. In fact, it has no strategy, or not one that will lead to the writers making any headway. These are unserious people, facing ruthless predators.

On the one hand, aside from a flurry of press releases, the WGA practices passivity, inertia and fatalism. It appeals to the companies on the basis that its contract proposal is modest and easily affordable. What a self-indictment! On the other hand, the Guild organizes pseudo-pep rallies, attended by various union officials (Teamsters, IATSE, AFL-CIO, etc.) and miscellaneous figures from the Democratic Party or its immediate orbit.

* The "support" of the various union officials comes from bureaucracies with decades of pro-corporate betrayals behind them. The Teamsters, IATSE, etc., whose dedication to "democracy" is renowned, are apparatuses in which workers find themselves trapped. The use of four-letter words by demagogues like the Teamsters' Lindsay Dougherty is in inverse proportion to her union's willingness to lift a finger for the writers.

The real character of the other unions' so-called backing, along with the WGA's complicity, has been revealed in the past few days in regard to the tentative agreement reached between the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and the AMPTP.

First, the various union bureaucracies issued a "joint statement of solidarity" imploring management and the DGA to reach a settlement before talks began with the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA). Why? Because

nothing terrified the union officialdoms, including the WGA's, more than the prospect of a broadened, mass strike. Now, to the relief of all the union bureaucrats—again, including those in the Writers Guild—the DGA has treacherously organized a deal, weakening the writers and every other worker in the industry.

With SAG-AFTRA members having voted 98 percent for a strike, the union leaders will now concentrate all their efforts on imposing a rotten deal on these workers.

* As for the Democratic Party, whose representatives show up at the occasional strike rally, it is a party of war and Wall Street. Scoundrels such as Rep. Adam Schiff, who voted to ban the railroad workers strike last year, are also given a platform by the WGA leadership. Schiff, whose top 20 contributors in 2021-22 included Comcast and Walt Disney, is one of the leading Democrats prepared to fight to the last Ukrainian in American imperialism's drive toward all-out war with Russia.

* The "solidarity" extended by the Democratic Socialists of America and its house organ, *Jacobin*, is an equally poisoned chalice. They nourish illusions and complacency, assuring the writers that their fate is in the best of all possible hands. These people, who have nothing in common with genuine "socialism," that is, the coming to power of the working class and the reorganization of society, are attached by an upper-middle-class umbilical cord to the union bureaucracies and the Biden administration. They too are terrified by a mass television and film strike that would escape the control of the union leaders.

One of the latest articles in *Jacobin* on the writers' strike ("The Writers' Strike Reminds Us Hollywood Is a Site of Class Struggle") is a glowing tribute to the AFL-CIO, at a time when masses of workers rightly regard its affiliates as hostile and alien to them.

Jacobin extols the virtues of IATSE, for example, without bothering to mention the role played by that union's officials, including the infamous Roy Brewster, in the smashing of efforts at industry-wide unionism in Hollywood after World War II and its spearheading of the purge of left-wingers from the film industry during the blacklist of the late 1940s and 1950s. In 2021, the IATSE leadership forced through a contract despite the fact that the majority of its membership voted against it.

Jacobin is merely applying chloroform.

These are not imaginary figures in a screenplay, these are the real people and social forces at work, with which the writers have to grapple.

As we pointed out above, many writers recognize that the enemy is the corporate oligarchy. This is not simply proven by their presence on picket-lines, but also by their artistic efforts:

• *Succession* devastatingly portrays leading figures in a major media conglomerate as scheming sociopaths ready and willing to do business with fascist politicians. Their watchword: “Money wins. Here’s to us.”

• In *The Dropout*, *Dopesick* and *Madoff*, writers offer further scathing portrayals of the criminality that pervades the American ruling elite.

• *Transatlantic* depicts the fate of Jewish and left-wing artists and intellectuals in France fleeing the Nazis and the Gestapo, assisted by US government officials, in 1940.

A genuine growth in social awareness, reflecting molecular processes going on among masses of people, is taking place among writers, directors and performers.

How can it be developed, taken farther? The present situation is impossible. The threat of war and fascism, the pandemic, the vast economic inequality, the ecological disasters, the mass shootings. In fact, American society as a whole is threatened with “full decomposition economically, morally and intellectually.” (Engels)

Freedom of expression and freedom of speech are under systematic attack. Books and ideas are increasingly banned. What’s next?

A way out of the present crisis has to be found. The current strike has once again revealed that the television and film writers’ situation is principally defined by the irreconcilable conflict between them and the massive corporate structures and other social forms, including the union officialdoms, hostile to them.

In our view, art and culture can only be defended and developed in so far as society is reorganized from top to bottom through a socialist transformation.

As the WSWS wrote during the 2007-08 strike, “Writers and other film artists with integrity are impelled to report on life honestly. Such work is inevitably socially critical, sympathetic to the exploited, hostile to the rich and arrogant, outraged by injustice. It must always contain an element of protest. In the end, these sentiments and qualities are incompatible with the industry executives’ drive for profits and need to conceal the harshest social realities. The record of the struggle between these two imperatives, now out in the open, now concealed, *is* the history of Hollywood.

“Writers,” we continued, “may not have consciously sought to overthrow the existing set-up in the entertainment industry, but their insistence on decent conditions of work *and* control over the destiny of their own creative efforts has always been perceived by executives as dangerous. After all, at stake are enormously powerful media that reach mass audiences.”

A new direction in the writers’ strike is called for, along with new organizations, representing the rank-and-file *and* the political-cultural needs of broad layers of the population.

Unity is necessary, and every worker instinctively gravitates in that direction. However, unity in the ranks when those at the head are leading those behind them into a trap, which they are organically incapable of avoiding, is not healthy. At that point, voices of dissidence and opposition have to be raised.

The leadership and negotiating committee of the WGA are dominated by well-heeled, politically “influential” elements, with countless connections to management and to the Hollywood establishment. In numerous cases, they have experience as semi-management themselves. They meet and associate with studio officials and lawyers, engage in unofficial negotiations on a systematic basis.

It is not enough for writers to dutifully staff picket lines and hope for

the best. The “best” only comes to those who help themselves. The entertainment corporations lost more than half a trillion dollars in market value in 2022 in their chaotic, reckless streaming efforts, a process that cries out for the rational, socialist planning of the industry. We have no sympathy for their losses, these are firms collectively with billions, perhaps trillions, in the bank. However, they are out for blood. Cutting costs is on the order of the day, and the writers are the first to face the assault. Artificial Intelligence, which has such vast potential, will be used to wipe out jobs and further “robotize” the writing of film and television scripts.

The Guild has no strategy for mobilizing the strength of the workers in the industry and beyond, which would require bypassing the SAG-AFTRA and DGA hierarchies, nor any desire to see the strike go in that direction. That would rock the boat, that would slice through all the cozy connections with big shots in the industry, the other union hierarchies and the Democratic Party.

In the end, even for the various “militants” on the WGA negotiating committees, a miserable deal with the AMPTP will simply be an inconvenience, a bump in the road, whereas for the less-established writers it will be a disaster.

We urge writers to consider these issues seriously. The WSWS has a proven record of being right on these matters.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) was founded in 2021 to answer a burning need, the development of a global counteroffensive of the working class in response to decades of social counterrevolution, imperialist war, the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and the growing danger of fascism and dictatorship.

The writers’ true allies are striking Clarios and Constellium workers in the Midwest, West Coast dock workers, Oakland teachers, embattled physicians in Queens, health care, auto and UPS workers and millions more. That’s where the writers should look for genuine support and solidarity.

If writers on both coasts formed rank-and-file committees they would formulate demands to protect writers from inflation and guarantee jobs and conditions, based not on what the companies claim they can afford, but on what writers and other workers require. Such committees would also inevitably begin addressing head-on the big political, social and cultural problems television and film artists face and how the viselike corporate grip can be shattered.



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