

Striking US writer: “Corporations are making billions and it’s not being reflected for the people who created the project”

Hong Jian, Liz Cabrera
11 June 2023

Over 11,000 writers in the entertainment industry, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), are coming to the end of their sixth week on strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). The strike is the result of years of decline in writers’ pay and working conditions.

Writers face a number of issues that are increasingly existential in nature. Falling residuals, due to the dramatic rise in streaming services, coupled with shorter seasons and smaller writing rooms, have seen writers’ pay drop by almost 25 percent in the last 10 years.

New technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) will be used to make further inroads into the creative control of artists and also reduce the number of writers needed on any given production.

Potentially, entertainment workers were in a strong position coming into this spring and summer, with contracts expiring for nearly 200,000 writers, directors, actors and other performers and professionals.

Rank-and-file workers in the industry have shown a clear willingness and desire to fight for a decent standard of living and conditions, but such a fight would require a joint struggle of all entertainment workers, including below-the-line workers in the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and Teamsters against the conglomerates that own the studios.

Instead, the various union officialdoms, in the WGA, Directors Guild of America (DGA), Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), Teamsters and IATSE, have done everything in their power to hinder and sabotage a united struggle. Nothing terrifies them more, along with

their allies in the Democratic Party and the pseudo-left, than the prospect of a mass strike and the shutting down of the industry.

This past week, striking writers were stabbed in the back by the DGA leadership who, after professing solidarity with the striking writers by signing the misnamed “joint statement of solidarity”—a public relations stunt by all the entertainment unions—reached a tentative agreement with the AMPTP last Saturday, which the DGA national board unanimously approved on June 6.

The tentative agreement is essentially a concessionary contract, which, among other things, contains pay raises well below the rate of inflation, and comes not only after writers have been on strike for five weeks, but also directly before SAG-AFTRA begins its contract talks with the AMPTP. It is meant to put pressure on the SAG-AFTRA bureaucrats to come to a rotten agreement, which would further undermine the writers’ position.

The WWSWS recently interviewed Catherine, a writer, on the picket line at Amazon Studios in Los Angeles. She has worked on network, cable and streaming one-hour dramas. She explained that writers were fighting for “so many things. The top thing on the list is the onset of AI and its usage. That needs to be regulated, because AI can’t be considered original work, because it’s not. It’s just what has been fed into the computer from copyrighted and other writers.”

Catherine continued, “I think that’s really an important part, we can’t ignore it, and need to recognize it and go a step further than what’s in the DGA contract,” before adding that, “This goes back to when cable started, we had to address that. We had to

address it to ensure that rank-and-file writers at all levels were taken care of and that the career of a writer in film and television continued. These things arise every few years as technology advances.”

In regard to residuals, Catherine said, “Of course there is the residual situation for streaming. It’s not what it should be. With the old model, every time a show was rerun, you got a residual check. I have actually seen my show three times, but am I going to get paid for that? Every time someone watches a streaming episode, it’s the same thing. There’s no money to the actor, the director, or the writer, or any other creators. And we have to regulate that as well.”

The AMPTP is made up of some of the wealthiest corporations in the world. The fact that their profits have gone through the roof has not been lost on writers. Catherine pointed out, “You can’t ignore that corporations are making billions and it’s not being reflected for the people who created the project. I think that’s something that’s happening all over in all industries. This is not just Hollywood.”

Asked by WSWs reporters her thoughts on the autoworkers upcoming struggle against the Big Three automobile giants and the move towards electric vehicles, which the corporations are using to slash jobs and wages, she responded by saying, “As far as the manufacture of electric cars, it could be historically related to the fact that as technology changes in the auto industry or elsewhere, practices need to be regulated to support the worker. Yes, inevitably, some jobs are no longer needed, yet there is room for acquiring updated skills. It just needs to be looked at and sensibly regulated so that it takes care of the people in the industry.”

We asked Catherine if she thought capitalism was capable of regulating corporations that profit from the exploitation of the working class. She responded, “Predatory capitalism is not my bag. Unfortunately, when you have a capitalist system that ignores the humanity of people, that’s a problem. Sure, it’s great to make a profit, but at the price of people’s lives? I don’t think so, you can’t forget people.”

Speaking about the ongoing US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia, Catherine said, “It is horrendous. All war is, unless you’re defending yourself against attack, but this aggressive kind of warmongering is never good.”

Finally, WSWs reporters inquired if Catherine had heard about *Blacklist: The Hollywood Red Scare*, an exhibition at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, focused on the history of the anti-communist blacklist of Hollywood writers. She noted that “this history is something that I thought the movie *Trumbo* showed really well. I used to teach in an MFA [Master of Fine Arts] program, and of course, in the history of film and television, that’s one of the topics that we educate the students on, because we cannot let it get back to that. We are a democracy. We are supposed to be, politically speaking. We have to vote, we don’t want to be a theocracy. We don’t want to be taken back to the ’50s. It’s 2023, so let’s act like we’ve matured.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact