

Striking film and television writers rally in New York's Times Square

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16 June 2023

Striking film and television writers held a rally in New York's Times Square on Thursday. For almost seven weeks, writers have been battling the savage cost-cutting campaign of the film studios, television networks and streaming services. The writers are threatened with being transformed into gig workers or replaced with artificial intelligence (AI), which the corporations covet not as a gateway to new artistic possibilities but as a new form of automation. More fundamentally, the strike raises questions about artistic freedom and the incompatibility of capitalism with the progressive development of culture.

The Writers Guild of America (WGA), to which the striking writers belong, billed the June 15 event as a "Broadway Day Rally." The theme doubtless came from the Tony awards, which had been held four days earlier. Among the artists who attended the rally to show support for the striking writers were Lin-Manuel Miranda (*Hamilton*, 2015), singer and actress Sara Bareilles and writer and actress Paula Pell (both from the series *Girls5eva*).

The WGA did not prevent the Tonys from proceeding, which it easily could have done, but instead asked the producers not to use a script. The union leadership encouraged members who had been nominated for Tony awards not to attend the ceremony. Following the advice of the Dramatists Guild, on the other hand, playwrights, composers and lyricists did attend the ceremony, but many expressed support for the striking writers. The artists who voiced their solidarity included director Patrick Marber, host Ariana DeBose and playwright Tom Stoppard, whose *Leopoldstadt* won the award for best play.

At the Times Square rally, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several writers and artists about the strike and the political and artistic issues it

raises.

Discussing the importance of culture, actress and writer Kathryn Grody said, "It's creative. It's human. It's unbelievably necessary. It feeds people's souls. It heals them from the horrors and gives them a voice to express things that they don't otherwise have the ability to express. I sometimes wonder if those corporate greedy people don't want that aspect of our voices to be heard."

Regarding the studios' confrontation with a mass of angry workers, Grody said, "We'll just be turned into AI, and they don't have to worry. They [i.e., computers] won't ask for a fair salary or food or shelter or a share in the pie."

Her husband, Broadway, film and television actor-singer and Tony Award winner Mandy Patinkin (*Evita*, *The Princess Bride*, *Criminal Minds*, *Homeland*) added, "If it becomes just AI and a machine-like entity that has no heart, there's no hope."

The WWSW asked Grody whether she thought artistic freedom was compatible with the giant corporations' monopoly on power. "Doesn't look like it is," she responded. "We have the illusion that it is." Implicitly referring to the freedom of expression formally guaranteed by the First Amendment, she continued, "We can say anything out here, but that doesn't change the system."

Patinkin interjected, "You never give up, though." Indicating a nearby office tower, he added, "The building isn't just corporations. There are people inside."

The anger of the writers, who recognize that their careers are at stake in this struggle, forced the union officials who addressed the rally to shake their rhetorical fists. These bureaucrats also sense the growing cross-industry solidarity among workers, who

face similar attacks on their livelihoods.

“We are here holding hands with the WGA to make sure that they are successful in their efforts to get a fair contract,” shouted Tino Gagliardi, president and executive director of Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada. “Their problems are our problems. We’re all in this together. One union! That’s what we need. One union! We need to all be on the same page, because we are suffering the same kind of ills as the WGA.”

However, the actions of the entertainment unions reveal they are fostering division and pursuing betrayal. Contracts for the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) will expire on June 30. The WGA, SAG-AFTRA, the Teamsters and other unions signed a “joint statement of solidarity” with the DGA about two weeks ago. In the statement, they humbly entreated the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which represents the studios, networks and streamers, to negotiate an agreement with DGA forthwith.

The AMPTP obliged, and the DGA leadership was only too happy to endorse a deal that cut its members’ wages. This betrayal not only attacked directors’ standard of living but also weakened the striking writers by preventing thousands of their allies from joining them in struggle. SAG-AFTRA grandees are now negotiating with AMPTP behind closed doors. They are rushing to reach a pro-studio deal that will prevent some 160,000 more workers from joining the striking writers.

Unity among writers, directors, actors and workers in all industries is essential to waging the necessary fight against capitalist exploitation and for a flourishing culture. But waging such a fight is impossible under the dictatorship of the union bureaucrats, whose social and economic position depends on maintaining labor peace on behalf of the companies. The road forward lies through the formation of rank-and-file committees that workers themselves control democratically. Only through such organizations can workers fight and win.



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