

Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist director Judy Chaikin: “When you silence that part of society, you cut its heart out”

Hong Jian
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A revisiting of the Hollywood blacklist and the “Red Scare” of the late 1940s and early 1950s is especially appropriate at the present moment. The entertainment industry, including the film world, is being convulsed by an upsurge in militancy among writers, actors and other sections of the work-force.

More than 11,000 writers, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), have been on strike since May 2. The leadership of the Directors Guild of America (DGA) rammed through a deal, ratified by only 35 percent of the membership, in late June, leaving the writers isolated on the picket-line. Now, the bureaucracy in the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), with 160,000 members, is attempting to accomplish the same thing.

SAG-AFTRA extended the union’s contract, which expired June 30, until July 12, in a desperate effort to come up with a deal. But the union officials face opposition, including a letter signed by more than 2,000 actors warning them not to betray the rank-and-file.

The current predicament of the writers, directors and actors is the product, in the first place, of rotten deals reached by their unions with the various production giants over the past several decades, resulting in paltry residuals, declining incomes and increased precarity. Now the corporations are going on the offensive, determined to reduce the bulk of film and television workers to part-time, disposable “gig” employees, brought in and kicked out as needed.

In the longer term, Hollywood has never fully recovered from the blacklist and loyalty oath era 75 years ago, during which radical writers, directors and actors were driven out of the industry, or intimidated into silence, and genuinely left-wing ideas, which challenged the foundations of the profit system, were for all intents and purposes made illegal in the American film industry. The Hollywood unions, which eagerly aided the witch-hunters, were taken over by pro-capitalist flunkies like Ronald Reagan, for years president of the Screen Actors Guild (one of the forerunners of SAG-AFTRA), before he entered electoral politics.

Four days after the DGA announced ratification of their deal,

and shortly before SAG-AFTRA extended their strike deadline, the WWSW sat down to talk with Judy Chaikin, the director and co-writer of the 1987 television documentary, *Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist*, an hour-long film which details the film industry anti-communist purge from the attack on the Hollywood Ten by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947 until the breaking of the blacklist with the appearance of Dalton Trumbo's name on the credits of both *Exodus* and *Spartacus* in 1960.

Chaikin’s film documents the period through newsreels, radio clips and footage of the HUAC hearings, including interviews with relatives of those blacklisted who lived through the era interwoven throughout. The film is narrated by Burt Lancaster.

WSWS: Why did you decide to make *Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist*? What drew you to that particular period in US political and cultural history?

JUDY CHAIKIN: I grew up in East Los Angeles in Boyle Heights, and we had a lot of very liberal, left-leaning people. It was basically a Jewish and Mexican community at the time. My parents were very liberal. I met a woman named Tiba Willner, whose husband [agent George Willner] had been blacklisted. I didn’t know very much about the blacklist at that time, although I remembered seeing about it as a kid on television.

But Tiba Willner started talking to me about various people in Hollywood. I was then working as an actress. She was telling me stories about her life with them, and I thought it was really interesting. I had just started directing. I was shifting from being an actress to being a director.

I asked her, “Can I come do a video on your life?” Because I thought she had a really interesting story. So I went up and I interviewed her, and then I showed that interview to some people. I was attending the American Film Institute at the time and they gave me a grant to finish doing the little film on her. Well, once I started doing the film on her, a lot of other people started coming into the equation and Tiba Willner started introducing me to other people and the story just grew from there.

WSWS: What are in your opinion some of the most

important ramifications of the blacklist, and do you think we are still living with them today or has time healed all wounds?

JC: No, I don't think time has healed the wounds. As a matter of fact, these wounds keep opening up every so often and they will not die down. I understand now there's actually a political movement that's trying to get the US government to issue an apology for the blacklist, so I will follow that with great interest.

The far-reaching ramification that we will never recover from is the loss of the great work of the artists who were blacklisted. That's something that we should all be ashamed of and sorry about, because the great artists, writers, directors, musicians, composers, singers, who worked so many years at their craft to bring those gifts to our society, to our world, were silenced. When you silence that part of society, you cut its heart out. That's what happened to the United States as a result of the blacklist.

WSWS: Have you spoken with any of the blacklist victims about the decision of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to honor Elia Kazan—one of the most prominent informers—with an Oscar in 1999 for Lifetime Achievement—and, if so, what did they think about it?

JC: Yes, we did talk about it at the time. It was a sad moment for a lot of people, for those who didn't forgive. When you get into the weeds on this whole thing of naming names and the people who named, it was such a horrific experience for all of them.

WSWS: In our day, one actor, Kevin Spacey, has been expunged from a completed film after the fact, while race and gender quotas are being handed down by the Academy, the military has a virtual veto power over blockbuster filmmaking and the industry is largely owned by hedge funds and banks. Do you think we could go through a similar period in the future, or are we already in such a period in regard to the #MeToo campaign?

JC: What I do see is a financial movement that is sucking the life out of the creative film industry. I can only interpret this from my point of view, but I make documentaries that are social comments. For a while, all the big streaming services were paying very good fees for these documentaries.

At the recent Sundance Film Festival, 12 socially conscious documentaries were presented at the festival and not one of them made a sale. That's because all the streamers have figured out, if people want to see documentaries, we can do them. We'll do them on our budget, on our dime. We'll own them all and we'll do them all about celebrities. It's not for political reasons. It's strictly financial. They don't want to pay the filmmakers, they want to own the whole thing, and that's a new kind of blacklisting, but it's not the old government blacklist, it's a financial blacklisting.

WSWS: What is your view of the writers' strike, as well as the deal agreed to by the Directors Guild [DGA], your union?

JC: This is the \$64 question. Nobody knows where the

situation is heading. We all know it's a disaster. The companies have absolute control over what's being aired. We're being fed comic scripts up the wazoo. Films of meaning are not finding release or distribution the way they should. It's a hard, hard time for artists. How that's going to change, that's going to have to come from the artists. They're going to have to become creative and come up with other solutions.

There's a lot of mystery about what went on in the DGA negotiations. The DGA has not been very forthcoming on what they negotiated. I have questions about why they would settle so quickly when our sister union, the Writers Guild, is suffering so greatly. It does not portend well. I would have hoped that we would have showed stronger support for the writers. But then again, I can't say for sure because I don't know what the deal was. I don't know what the terms were. That's after they've already said it's a done deal. They haven't revealed all the details.

WSWS: Would you revisit the period of the blacklist?

JC: I've been fortunate enough to be revisiting it for some unusual reasons. A few months ago, the Hollywood Heritage Museum did an afternoon dedicated to *Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist* and to the children of all the blacklisted people in the film. They brought together a wonderful exhibition. Then of course, you know about the exhibition that's going on at the Skirball [Cultural Center] right now. The night before last I went to an event at the Skirball, where my friend Wendy Malick was one of the performers in the program. It was so brilliant.

One of the things that really touched me was the contribution of those artists. They started off the program playing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, which was written by Yip Harburg, who was blacklisted. He had such genius, and gave us a song that touches everybody's heart the way it does, and he was silenced. And that was so profound.



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