

Writers and actors in Los Angeles speak to the WSWS: “I think we’re seeing capitalism at its worst in a lot of ways”

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The WSWS interviewed striking writers and their actor supporters, who were about to become strikers, outside Netflix operations at Sunset Bronson Studios in Los Angeles July 13.

Mike, writer, Writers Guild of America (WGA) member

I think at the top of the list of concerns is protection of writers’ rooms. Mini rooms have kind of taken over. It’s been a destructive process that really limits both pay and opportunity for everybody. But primarily for new people that are trying to climb the ranks. There’s not really a pathway to growth anymore. So that’s certainly a thing that needs to be addressed.

In addition, AI protections are critical, of course. Nobody’s saying AI shouldn’t be used in a creative way. It’s just it shouldn’t be used to generate new ideas, to write scripts, to replace jobs. Then residuals, of course. It makes zero sense that somebody can write a number one show on Netflix and they don’t have any access to the numbers and aren’t paid for that creation.

Now when it comes to SAG and joining the fight now, we’re starting to see a real change in public discourse. There’s a real energy that has been added. If spirits were deflating at one point, the article that said the studios were trying to wait us out to get us homeless, that definitely lifted some spirits. Then SAG members saying that they feel they need the same type of things that we do as writers, they need to be respected and paid appropriately, protections against AI, better working conditions, all these things. So I think them joining, the Writers Guild in total, the West and the East combines about 20,000 members, SAG’s 160,000. So you bring eight times more people into the race. And the actors add faces. No one knows who wrote *The Bear*, but people know who the actors are, and they become the face of the strike. It’s a really powerful situation.

If you just look at Los Angeles right now, you have a lot of hotel workers going on strike. You’ve got UPS. UPS is likely going to go on strike as well. If you look at just the entertainment industry, in the past it’s been pretty fragmented. Divide and conquer is the strategy that these studios and higher-ups have been using, and it worked with the Directors Guild; they got the DGA to make a deal pretty quickly. That lowered our bargaining power, if you will. If the actors had made a deal, it would have been the same thing. The writers would have been in a really tough spot. Their joining us is great.

As a writer, I’m appreciative of those members of IATSE who haven’t crossed the picket lines. Their jobs are also now being lost because of the shutdown. They’re sacrificing for our gain as well.

I think we’re seeing capitalism at its worst in a lot of ways and there’s holes that are now being poked in a number of areas and it’s a beautiful thing to see in my opinion.

In terms of the general situation, if you pour enough water into a cup it’s going to eventually overflow. The advent of social media and the

development of means to communicate messages to a larger audience in a faster, more efficient way are really expanding the speed at which people are having enough. That water being poured, if you will, is now happening at a faster rate because people are talking about it more. People are upset about it more at a more vocal level. So I think that’s where a lot of the speed is coming in and the energy in the more recent times.

I can only really speak on Los Angeles seeing as this is where I live. You just look at the street and you see a great difference in wealth. You’ll see a car that’s barely running and a car that costs half a million dollars right next to each other. In a city like this, the poor are getting poorer, the rich are getting richer. You’re seeing this divide in a really, really intense and visual way that people are feeling.

I don’t think it’s Republican or Democratic Party specific, right? There was a suppression for so long that by the time people really opened their eyes and looked around and said, oh my goodness, this is where we’re at, it was already a big problem. Now we’re having to try and play catch-up.

In our field, the issue of residuals is one for actors and writers too. I don’t put this on the unions, I put this on the studios. If there’s an opportunity to treat a human like a human, if fairness is fairness, if the bottom line and putting a dollar sign are not more important than a human being, then I don’t think we run into almost any of these issues. We would have a deal by now, and we’d be moving forward and making great content for people to enjoy. Over the past couple decades, a lot of practices have been put in place that reward greed, and capitalistic greed, and the people in power have the power to enforce that, you know? Now we are seeing the result and thankfully there is some unity in fighting back.

Marian, actress, member of Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA)

The strike is about getting things we need to survive. The people who are out here are middle and lower class actors. We are not the big stars that write our own contracts and have a plushy life.

To be able to do what we love to do, I have to have a full-time job. I’d like to pursue this more and maybe just do that part-time, have it go from full-time to part-time job maybe one or two days a week.

There are so many issues: there’s the matter of residuals, and the AI issue. That’s not a big deal right now, but you have to look ahead. They didn’t do that with streaming and look how streaming got out of hand. If they had tackled this 15 years ago in the contracts it would not be where it is. People would be making the money that they used to. Now with AI, they can bring back deceased people. What can they do with live people? They have a lot of people’s images, they have their voice, that’s what it’s coming to.

We have to nip it in the bud right now before it gets out of hand. It’s not just for us, it’s for the people after us. The people who are in grade school

or high school who want to be writers and actors. A lot of the TV actors from the '50s and '60s gave up a lot for us in contracts and they shouldn't have had to. So I think it's on us to help us, but also to help the next generation so that there'll be jobs for them.

There's a lot of shenanigans going on. There was the article yesterday in which executives said that they want to keep this strike going with the writers until the writers are so broke they lose their houses or they get evicted. They can't feed their families. What kind of people are they? Yet they're multimillionaires on their yachts off France and Italy, and they're laughing at us?

I have a full-time job in a drugstore, but I don't have health care. It's too expensive for me to buy in. So right now I don't have any, but I keep myself healthy. I never had COVID and I worked five days a week, 40 plus hours a week with the public. And my store went through two rounds of COVID. So, I take care of myself, take the proper vitamins, I just keep myself healthy, so that something doesn't happen to me. I've always been that way.

During the pandemic, some well-known actors lost their health care because they weren't working, like Sharon Stone, Shannen Doherty, who has cancer, they couldn't meet the eligibility. It used to be not so hard to qualify, but then it's gotten worse, you have to work more hours to be able to qualify. It's too bad they couldn't have kept it much easier to qualify.

Julie, writer and WGA member

It's really exciting. It's a really good opportunity for workers to have inter-union solidarity and use this moment for real change because there's a reason it's come to this point. The industry has been moving in a direction that's unsustainable for all of us. It is a very "seize the moment" kind of moment. Something like this strike is one of the opportunities to change what needs to be changed.

There are so many different ways the AMPTP members are cutting corners to make sure that we get paid as little as possible for the work that we do to make them successful. Residuals is obviously a huge issue, streaming residuals particularly; the size of writers' rooms getting smaller and smaller for more and more work, guaranteeing that fewer people get jobs; lots of free work in development when we're working on pitches and things like that for studios. They'll have us on the hook for months and months without pay. There are so many ways they're cutting down on our ability to make a sustainable living doing what we do. Protection from AI. We want writing to be a career and not a gig, that is just an occasional thing.

A win for one union is a win for everyone because the upper classes are a very small percentage of this world. The other workers' rich, greedy bosses are watching what happens to ours during this strike. So it's like a small community of people wondering how much we can take. Any version of saying no or putting our foot down, that scares anyone else who's abusing workers or trying to make our lives harder or trying to take money out of our pockets.

I know that some writers have gone to hotel union protests already, we've had teachers join us, so it's, I think people are starting to sense our collective power, which is good.

There's only so much we can take before we oppose the pressure to not have those kind of opinions or we oppose quietly accepting what capitalism spells out for us. We can't, accepting that makes sense to less and less people as more and more of us suffer, I guess, which is good.

Robert, actor, SAG-AFTRA member

I'm an actor. What brings me here is supporting the writers. I look at how they used to be able to afford a type of lifestyle, it was a sustainable career. That has changed with the streaming ecosystem. That is a concern of mine.

So we're all fighting the same fight.

We all need to work, we all need to have a job, but I think a lot of

people are sick of this whole situation: "I work for UPS. I bring people their packages. I make sure that I deliver the packages. I do my job well. I don't want to work for this company for 40 years and get sick and then have no coverage or be kicked off my health care." So it's things like that that I notice that people want improvement in. I don't have all the answers, but I know that people want better for themselves.

You have to say things aren't OK for them to change, and you have to display that you're not OK with things. If you seem OK with things and you are OK with things, things might stay the same forever. So, that's why you see the people out here today picketing and striking. It's the fight that most people are willing to fight because they don't want to be discarded like a piece of trash in human form.

Artificial Intelligence is a major concern of mine and I hope that people don't sell their likeness in perpetuity. So I'm not a fan. I think it's great when people can do CGI work and things like that, but I'm not interested in selling my likeness forever so that studios and production companies can use it without my being there.

Gia, writer, WGA member

SAG-AFTRA joining the strike exponentially increases the leverage that the labor side of this struggle has against the corporate entities.

We are in coordination with other guilds. There is a larger multi-labor union solidarity, and all Writers Guild members get notices, we have been out with the hotel workers, so we are in fact doing that cross-pollination.

We are looking at general social and economic conditions that feel more like an oligarchy where essentially the 1 percent rule.

I'm really heartened by the fact that our stance has won support. Here we are in week 11, and it's going to be 90 degrees, and we're out here. We have inspired other people in other places.

We've had international journalists who flew here from Korea, Japan, France, Italy, Germany, because everyone globally understands that this issue of corporate greed fighting against labor is a global issue that we can all relate to. Everyone understood that on day one. Now here we are 11 weeks later. We haven't broken. We haven't bent. We're still doing this. And when I say we haven't broken, I mean there's still people showing up here. It sucks to come out here every day. It's hard. We don't have any money.

Everyone realizes that capitalism is out of control. Everyone realizes that we live in a fundamentally unfair economic landscape as a result. But what people are now just waking up to is that they have more power than they realize. There's always going to be the 1 percent, but guess what? We're the 99 percent. And I would just encourage everyone, it takes courage and it also takes a little bit of a mindset shift because in the US we don't value working class people and we don't see them valorized in popular culture. Everyone wants to be a white-collar worker, everyone wants to be beyond the working class. But that's not the reality. So if you are a working class person, use your power. And make a stand.



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