

Actors and writers bring film and television production in the US to a halt, with growing impact in Canada, UK

David Walsh
16 July 2023

After three days of the joint strike by 76,000 writers and actors in the US, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), its broader international and social significance is coming powerfully to the fore.

The strike, which involves many well-known artists and many unheralded ones barely getting by, is part of a developing broad-based working class movement. Tens of millions of people around the globe have become aware of this social conflict in the US, which further helps to puncture the myths that American capitalism peddles about itself. It will only encourage workers' struggles in the US and elsewhere. The actors and writers themselves are attuned in large numbers to events in France, to the possibility of a UPS strike at the end of the month and other social developments.

The double strike is a major international event, not only because masses of people follow the American entertainment industry (its products are among US capitalism's leading exports), but because of the global, interconnected character of film, television and media production.

Film and television production in the US has come to a halt, but production in at least Canada, Britain, Ireland and Greece is also expected to be affected.

In British Columbia, home to more than 50 animation studios, according to Reuters, employing up to 88,000 people, film production is down to "a trickle." The workers in the Canadian province are vulnerable, Reuters writes, because the province's "film industry is largely based around gig work. ... People are hired for a specific production. If there are no productions, they do not get paid. This could leave thousands of people looking for work outside the industry if the strike drags on." The Toronto International Film Festival, which has hosted many premieres of US films, may well be impacted.

Moreover, actors in Canada are in revolt over an attempt by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, in agreement with local unions, to pull a fast one. The Union of British Columbia Performers/Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (UBCP/ACTRA) recently agreed to extend their existing contract for a year in exchange for a 5 percent wage increase.

Sixty-eight Canadian actors signed a July 10 letter that urges

West Coast performers in the UBCP/ACTRA to reject a "preemptive deal" that they claim, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, "will undercut current contract talks stateside with the SAG-AFTRA and the Writers Guild of America that has led to a double Hollywood strike. 'We will not be used as a bargaining chip. We deserve our own deal and we deserve better than this,' states the letter."

The open letter is an echo of the letter signed by 2,000 members of SAG-AFTRA in late June warning against a union sellout.

The Canadian actors' letter reads, in part: "This is an unprecedented time. Our employers have increased their profits by billions, while slashing our compensation and undermining our working conditions. But we, too, have power. Our strength is in solidarity—with our members and with the labor movement at large. This is an inflection point. We must protect ourselves, our worth and the future artists in our industry. The economic survival of our very professions are at stake."

In Britain, cast members of Christopher Nolan's biographical film, *Oppenheimer*, about J. Robert Oppenheimer, the theoretical physicist involved in the production of the atomic bomb, walked out of the film's premiere in London on Thursday on news of a strike being launched. Cillian Murphy, Emily Blunt, Matt Damon, Florence Pugh and Robert Downey Jr. were among those who left the event. Director Nolan told the audience that the actors were "off to write their picket signs." This was part of "the struggle for fair wages," he added, to applause.

The BBC reported that in "Britain and other European countries, the national acting and writing unions are monitoring the damage. And the technical unions representing crew and support industries share the sense of foreboding. Bectu, the union for the British creative industries, has warned that a 'perfect storm is brewing' for freelancers. Many productions are now at risk of going into hiatus, it believes, and it expects others will follow if mediation fails."

As for the US production companies, Hollywood executives thought they could "ride out a skirmish with screenwriters," writes the *Los Angeles Times*, but "few executives were prepared for—or wanted—a strike by the industry's largest union, SAG-AFTRA." The throngs of performers joining the writers' picket lines plunged "Los Angeles' signature industry into chaos... further complicating what some fear could become a long and devastating strike."

Movie production has come to a halt and the upcoming television season “could sputter, devoid of new scripted episodes” of many popular series, according to the *Times*. Hollywood’s “discord,” it goes on, “has taken on the trappings of a larger cultural clash, ostensibly pitting everyday workers against top wage earners, America’s 1%. On picket lines and social media sites, richly compensated industry leaders, including Disney Chief Executive Bob Iger and Warner Bros. Discovery Chief David Zaslav, are being portrayed as cartoon villains.

“Outside Disney’s Burbank headquarters on Friday, a striking worker hoisted a sign that depicted Iger’s face superimposed on a hand-drawn Marie Antoinette figure, holding a raspberry-colored confection under the words: ‘How about sharing some of that cake, Bob?’”

The outrage over Iger’s comments about the “unrealistic” and “very disturbing” character of the actors’ and writers’ demands, this from a man who earned more \$200 million in the last five years, has not subsided.

Actor Sean Gunn, brother of director James Gunn (*Guardians of the Galaxy*), took aim at Iger, telling the Disney executive to “take a look in the mirror” and ask himself if it is morally correct to make “400 times more” than his company’s lowest-paid worker. “If your response is that that’s just the way business is done now... well, that sucks and that makes you a s— person.” Gunn went on to indicate that “You really need to rethink how you do business and share the wealth with people. ... Otherwise, this is all going to come crashing down.”

Brian Cox, the star of *Succession*, the popular series about a giant media corporation and its cutthroat operations, told *Sky News* that the strike “could get very, very unpleasant. It could go on for quite some time. They’ll take us to the brink, and we’ll probably have to go to the brink.” Cox criticized the streaming services for their refusal to pay actors decent residuals. He noted that the system is “failing rapidly. ... If our residuals go down, it means our health insurance isn’t going to be met.”

On Friday, George Clooney said, “Actors and writers in large numbers have lost their ability to make a living,” going on to speak of “an inflection point in our industry.” Matt Damon told the Associated Press that it was necessary to “protect the people [who] are kind of on the margins. ... Twenty-six thousand bucks a year is what you have to make to get your health insurance, and there are a lot of people whose residual payments are what carry them across that threshold. If those residual payments dry up, so does their health care, and that’s absolutely unacceptable.”

On Twitter, actor John Cusack took issue with the conglomerates and their use of Artificial Intelligence, which he described as a “criminal enterprise.” Cusack added that in 10 years the companies will say “we had no idea this would happen... when the scope and scale of the plunder is revealed—of course they did—it’s the business model. The algorithms serve the profit motive—AI savage capitalism—blame it on the algorithms you create to make more money.”

The anonymous comments by a studio executive, cited in *Deadline* last week, to the effect that the entertainment companies were deliberately planning to drag the writers’ strike out for months “until union members start losing their apartments

and losing their houses,” have been met with even greater anger on picket lines and by writers and actors in their public comments.

Forbes reported that in an Instagram post, actor Ron Perlman warned that “we know who said that, and where he f—ing lives,” advising the executive to “be careful.” *Forbes* noted that “Perlman said the comments amounted to wishing that ‘families starve,’ adding the executive makes millions of dollars a year for ‘creating nothing.’ The actor... concluded the video with a warning for the executive to ‘be really careful,’ following his comment, saying, ‘that’s the kind of s— that stirs s— up.’”

Struggles by great battalions of the industrial and service working class lie ahead, at UPS, in the auto industry, on the docks, in healthcare and education. This is the answer to war, pandemic, fascist reaction: the path of the global class struggle and the overthrow of capitalism.

What does the #MeToo campaign signify in the light of this strike? And racial politics? On the picket lines, every ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation and lifestyle is represented, film workers brought together by the great class questions—the relentless drive of the corporations to suppress wages and destroy conditions and the decayed state of capitalism—and taking part in a new offensive by the entire working class.

With all their enthusiasm and determination, the strikers face the reality that the union bureaucracies are incapable of leading a struggle against the predatory enemy, the massive conglomerates and Wall Street. A new leadership needs to emerge among the writers and actors. We fight for this to take shape in the form of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, fighting for great economic, social and cultural goals, including the expropriation by the working class of these entertainment corporations and their use for the benefit of humanity, not the accumulation of wealth by a handful.



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