

Striking film and television actors and writers in California and New York: “There are too many people who cannot get along, so we’re not going to accept it”

Our reporters
17 July 2023

Tens of thousands of film and television writers and actors in the United States, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), are exhibiting tremendous commitment to their joint strike against the multi-billion-dollar entertainment and media monopolies.

The strike, the largest indefinite walkout in the US in decades and biggest ever in the film and television industry, has immense international, social and cultural significance. In their determination to fight against the abuses heaped on them by some of the largest corporations in the world, the actors and writers express the sentiments of millions of workers across the globe entering into struggle. In the US alone, hundreds of thousands of UPS, autoworkers, West Coast dockers and numerous other sections of the working class are embarking on potentially explosive class battles.

Many A-list artists have voiced their support for the strike, including George Clooney, Jennifer Lawrence, Meryl Streep, Mark Ruffalo and Matt Damon. However, the conditions faced by the vast majority of working actors and writers in Hollywood are not represented by this small layer. Most find it difficult or impossible to find steady work and are barely compensated when they do land a job in the industry. Only a small percentage of SAG-AFTRA members qualify for the union’s \$26,470 health care threshold. Most are forced to take on multiple “day jobs” to pay the bills and put food on the table. Meanwhile, studio, network and streaming executives rake in tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars each year.

A central issue in the joint strike has been the severe reduction in residual payments to actors and writers, which traditionally provided many with a steady base income. The devastation of residuals has occurred with the industry’s transition to video streaming. The companies refuse to tie residuals to the success of their programs, insisting that viewership remain secret. The unions to this point have accepted this, resulting in a serious decline in incomes.

Working actors have described receiving residual checks for as little as “one penny” for their work on hit mini-series and

television shows receiving millions of views on video streaming platforms. Actress Kimiko Glenn, known for playing the character Brook Soso in the popular Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black*, told the *New Yorker* magazine that she received only \$27.30 in overseas royalties from Netflix in 2020. Glenn continued, “So many of my friends who have nearly a million followers [on social media], who are doing billion-dollar franchises, don’t know how to make rent.”

Last Friday, on the first day of the strike, actors and writers in southern California and New York spoke to the World Socialist Web Site about the loss of income through the turn to streaming services, the cutting of residual pay, the transformation of actors and writers into “gig” workers and the serious threats posed by Artificial Intelligence technology controlled by the predatory media and entertainment conglomerates.

Asim, a film and television actor in California, spoke with the WSW: “We’re striking because there’s a real problem with the pay, a problem with residuals, there’s a problem with the AI technology coming up. We’re trying to address those issues now before it goes too far.”

“I read on the Internet, I’m not sure how true it is, that they were asking to use background actors’ image in perpetuity. They use you once, pay you once, and then use your image for, not the rest of your life, but as long as they would like to.”

“If you don’t have background actors, that’s a huge chunk of actors you would no longer have in the union and would not have to pay anymore. They would be out of work and no longer able to support themselves. It’s things like that we have to address right now before it gets too bad. It’s actually already gotten very bad.”

David, another California actor on the picket line, addressed the conditions facing actors in the film and television industry:

“It’s always been like a gig for us, especially since streaming. Many actors go from one job to the next job, gig work, but the union’s supposed to be there to protect the wage and to compensate actors with residual pay, which I used to count on. However, the negotiations over the years have decreased the amount of money that you get for working a job. I can’t count on that money anymore.”

He continued, “Earlier, I was able to live more comfortably on my income. I still had to work as a part-timer, not lucky enough to work as a full-time actor, but one time when I got a commercial that I worked two to three days on I had big money. I worked on other commercials, two or three days a week. My whole year was paid off. There’s no pay like that anymore. That was in 2009. That does not exist anymore. Day rates have gone down. Compensation and residuals are down. This is why we are out here.”

Nachayka, an actor in New York City, spoke to the changes brought about by advances in technology and its impact on actors and writers, explaining “our situation has only been getting worse. As technology is moving forward, for example with streaming, the necessary adjustments are not happening to ensure our wellbeing. With broadcast shows, you could do one show a year and live off of that income. With streaming, people are getting \$2 checks, 50 cent checks, in other words, nothing. But the executives are making millions from the millions of views these shows get.”

“Then you have the talk about A.I,” she said. The studios’ “best” offer “is that they pay you one time and then that’s it. They can use your image even when you are dead. So, you have 20 A.I. images, that’s 20 actors who are going hungry.”

New York City actor Roland pointed to the immense wealth produced by film and television production and domination of a handful of wealthy executives over the industry;

“The producers have all this money they are hoarding and they refuse to share any of the wealth. Then they try to play poor and avoid giving actors their fair share. It’s not right! Especially, since what we are asking for is minimal compared to the amount of money that the producers hoard. These are multi-millionaires and billionaires! I was watching the news yesterday and [Disney CEO] Bob Iger, a multi-multi-millionaire, had the nerve to get on camera saying ‘Oh, they’re asking for too much.’ Really? He made himself look like an idiot.”

Nachayka chimed in, “It really gives you a sense of the type of people we are dealing with. They want to starve out the writers and now us actors. They call it a ‘necessary evil.’ Who does that?!”

“There is never enough money for the production companies,” Roland continued. “They always want more and, of course, the people who actually produce that wealth are not allowed to share it.”

Asked whether artistic freedom can exist when multi-billion-dollar conglomerates beholden to Wall Street control artistic and cultural output, Asim in Los Angeles responded, “I don’t think so. I think that’s a main reason why we’re seeing the same content again and again, the industry regurgitates the same things. Remake after remake. It’s because that’s what is getting greenlit by these non-creative executives. They aren’t artists, but they are making decisions about the art people get to see.”

“They control the way we put out information and the information we put out. Someone was talking about making this strike into a movie. But it would never get greenlit because the people we would be criticizing are the people who greenlight the movies.”

However, Asim also pointed to the work that has slipped through the fingers of the studios, providing an important and increasingly critical commentary on aspects of social reality, “We have seen

some good shows that came out more recently too, like *Succession*. We get a criticism of the billionaires. I’m sure it’s not far off from the way they really are. It’s fiction, but not far off.”

Expanding upon his earlier comments, Asim commented, “I think this is just a microcosm of what’s happening across the country. I think there are going to be more strikes in the near future. There are going to have to be some changes because there are too many people hurting. There have always been a lot of people who are hurting and poor and can’t feed themselves, but now there are too many people who cannot get along, so we’re not going to accept it.”

He continued, “There’s like a symbiotic relationship between corporations and the government. I think that’s why it was kind of disheartening that the employers brought in a government mediator, because the government is always going to be on the side of billion-dollar corporations.”

“The government spends trillions on the military. There are people who can’t afford to eat, who don’t have a place to sleep, the housing market is ridiculously out of whack. I think that starting grassroots-type organizations is how to change things. Take over the government if we don’t feel like they are worthy of power. This is a very pivotal time, because there are 300-something million people in America. Are we going to let a handful of people destroy our lives? We have to fight, and I think after a while, we will fight back.”

“We need to kind of take a note from events in France. I think they’re a little more demanding than we are. We can’t accept certain things.”

Ethan, a striking writer in New York City, commented on the strike’s place as part of the international struggle of the working class, “As bad as the labor situation is for motion pictures and Hollywood entertainment in America, it’s a lot worse in most of the world. Hopefully, any momentum that we get going here, can get picked up and carried on. We definitely need to make a stronger effort to support international film workers.”

“There’s a general strike movement going on in a way that has not been there for a while, which is an inevitable response to wage decreases and attacks on workers. This is a major strike. It’s the entertainment industry! You could not have a more public strike, except for the package delivery workers at UPS, who are actually also preparing for a strike. This summer could see the most important public and publicly supported strike movement in decades.”

West-Coast actor David concluded, “Without the backs of labor, we wouldn’t have anything. No big cities, industry, nothing. This is just one example of many struggles to come.”



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