

Amid global offensive of the working class

US writers and actors continue their fight against entertainment giants

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21 July 2023

Tens of thousands of US writers and actors are confronting the giant entertainment companies, in a strike with global and historical significance. There are no negotiations at present and no immediate end in sight. Figures on both sides of the conflict are talking about the possibility of the walkout lasting for months, although the Biden administration and powerful sections of the establishment will try with all the means at their disposal to suppress it.

With the contracts of hundreds of thousands of UPS and autoworkers expiring soon, the possibility of major shutdowns of critical industries looms.

The WSWS argued at the beginning of 2023 that the “long period of enforced stagnation through the mechanism of the trade union apparatus is encountering mass opposition. In country after country, there is a renewal of working class militancy. ‘The laws of history,’ as Trotsky once wrote, ‘are more powerful than the bureaucratic apparatus.’” This is being borne out in increasingly explosive eruptions of social struggle, which will bring in wider and wider layers of the working class.

The current strike by the actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), came about in particular only because of a semi-revolt by thousands of performers against the danger their union leaders would once again sell them out.

The processes occurring in the entertainment and media industries resemble those taking place in many others—increased casualization, loss of decent-paying jobs, the wiping out of gains made over the course of decades. The companies speak about “new realities,” “new business models” and “new technologies” for which workers must pay and pay again.

The film, television and media giants are attempting to reduce their workforce to “gig” status, available when needed and other than that, essentially disposable.

The conditions of the writers and actors have been deteriorating for years, thanks to the acquiescence of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and SAG-AFTRA. Contract after contract, the unions have retreated in the face of the companies, surrendering their members’ incomes and

interests.

Writers sacrificed a great deal in the 100-day strike in 2007-2008, at the end of which the WGA assured its members that a “historic” agreement had been reached, protecting writers against the threat of streaming. In truth, the companies were given a virtual green light, and the union is now forced to admit that writers have been the victims of the transition to streaming.

The conglomerates are operated by billionaires, who intend to impose poverty wages and precarious working conditions on hundreds of thousands of workers in the film and television industry to bolster and increase their profits. The billions raked in by the member companies of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and their executives are well known and increasingly notorious.

The companies continue to lie and claim, in the face of widespread anger and nearly unanimous strike votes by both WGA and SAG-AFTRA memberships, that their offers are generous and their employees have never had it so good. Why then are they prepared to strike for weeks or months on end?

SAG-AFTRA asked for an 11 percent general wage increase in year one, 4 percent in year two and 4 percent in year three of a three-year contract. This might cover the increases in the cost of living over the term of the contract, but it would not make up for what actors have lost over the past decade and more. In response, the AMPTP proposed increases of 5 percent in year one, 4 percent in year two, 3.5 percent in year three, leaving actors worse off at the end of the contract than they are now, given the current rate of inflation.

The companies insultingly reply that their offer “is historic by any measure. The last time the Union secured a general wage increase of 5% in any year was in 1988.”

The AMPTP has offered writers even less, increases of 4 percent in minimum rates the first year, followed by 3 percent and 2 percent.

According to the Writers Guild, writers are increasingly working for “guild minimums,” the lowest rate that can be paid to a WGA member. A union survey indicated that writers’ pay has fallen by 14 percent in five years, and writer-producers earn 23 percent less than a decade ago. Anecdotally, many writers

claim their incomes have been cut in half.

“In the 2013-14 season,” the union argues, “33% of all TV series writers were paid minimum; now half are working at minimum.” Whereas in 2013-14, only 2 percent of showrunners (the individual with creative authority and management responsibility for a television program) were paid minimum rates, that had increased to 24 percent in 2021-22.

Meanwhile, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, the “average pay for Hollywood’s top execs climbed to \$28 million in 2021, up 53% from 2018 (and roughly 108 times the average writer’s pay).” “Average writer” itself is deeply misleading, as a relative handful of individuals attached to massive projects earn the bulk of the collective writers’ pay.

On residuals, the AMPTP rejects out of hand the union’s modest proposal that “Casts share in the revenue generated when their performances are exhibited on streaming platforms,” asserting that this was “a roadblock to reaching an agreement.”

The companies are hoping to starve the writers and actors back to work, with the help of the WGA, SAG-AFTRA and the rest of the union leaderships. Countering the assault of the corporations will require a concerted, mass offensive by the working class, a strategy that is anathema to the well-paid, pro-corporate officials of the entertainment unions, including IATSE, as well as the Teamsters, the UAW and the rest of the AFL-CIO.

New means of struggle are necessary. Workers will increasingly turn to the formation of rank-and-file committees, organized on an international scale, unleashing the genuine power of the working class and opposing, in the words of the WSWS statement earlier this year, “the bureaucratic [union] apparatus, which has worked in close collaboration with the corporations and the government in a desperate attempt to contain social anger.”

On Friday, British actors expressed their solidarity with US strikers at rallies in London’s Leicester Square and in Manchester’s Media City. *Succession* star Brian Cox told the London crowd that “We are at the thin end of a really horrible wedge.” He said things were worse in the US due to the lack of a national health service. “What is important to SAG actors is health, and they need that. That’s why they need their residuals.”

Cox referred to a fellow actor, who had recently contacted him. “He’s playing a reasonable part in a TV show, and he’s on a what they call a supporting artists contract,” Cox told the rally. “The horrible thing was that he was told in no uncertain terms that they would keep his image and do what the f___ they liked with it. That is a completely unacceptable position and a position we should be fighting against.”

Also in attendance were actors David Oyelowo, Hayley Atwell, Simon Pegg, Imelda Staunton and Jim Carter.

The WSWS spoke Friday to striking WGA and SAG-AFTRA members and their supporters, some 300 of whom picketed in

front of Netflix’s New York headquarters. The majority were actors, but there were also a considerable number of writers on hand. A WSWS reporter commented, “The picketing was spirited and drew a good deal of attention in the narrow, congested streets of Lower Manhattan. Nearby Union Square has been the site of workers’ demonstrations for well over a century. Many drivers honked and pedestrians applauded the strikers. An enormous cheer went up from the pickets when a UPS driver drove by honking his horn.

“The picket line had an energy that was different from many other recent strikes in the New York area. Not only did the crowd of workers cross occupational lines, with the joint strike of actors and writers, but many members of IATSE, scene painters and other support staff joined the picketing line because they are now idled by the strike. Public school teachers from the largest school district in the country, fresh off a contract betrayal by the union bureaucracy, also joined in, and even high school youth came to show their support.

“Two high school students, would-be writers, told the WSWS they had come because they believed in equality, that billionaires should not have everything for themselves. One of them said, ‘The more people go on strike, the stronger the possibility is for change.’ Generally, the mood of the strikers the WSWS spoke to was angry and reflected deep opposition to the oligarchy that controls the film and television industry.

“Some pickets told the WSWS that the same conglomerates that owned the entertainment industry had their claws in almost every other aspect of the economy. Nearly every striker raise the possibility of a UPS strike at the end of the month. Some spoke of the hotel strike in Los Angeles, and others spoke of the threat of fascism in ‘our supposed democracy’ or the role of Biden in suppressing the railway workers strike last year. Yet others connected their struggle to the abominable treatment of asylum seekers in New York City by Mayor Eric Adams.”



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