

Striking actors and writers in New York speak to the WSWS: “This money, this greed, could ultimately end art as an industry”

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On July 21, hundreds of actors, writers and their supporters picketed the offices of Netflix in Lower Manhattan in New York City. The location is in one of the oldest parts of the city with its narrow, congested streets. Drivers honked and passersby applauded. Despite heat and high humidity, the pickets were spirited and determined.

The WSWS spoke to a variety of people who had joined the picket line, including actors and writers, but also scenic artists, members of IATSE, who were not on strike but were idled because most of the film and television industry has been shut down. Also present were New York City teachers and high school students.

Corvin and Val, actors

Corvin: What we’re talking about is unfettered capitalism. A capitalism that operates in such a way that doesn’t benefit the entire industry and all the people that contribute to it, but rather the select few at the very, very top. They are trying to turn us into day laborers and hourly workers, who will not have a lot of advocacy for ourselves or a lot of leverage to even negotiate contracts in the future.

WSWS: What impelled you two actors to strike and to be on the picket line today?

Val: Life is really difficult. It’s a humbling experience.

How we pay our bills is not actually by our paycheck through television, film, media.

I work at a restaurant almost full time. And it’s a difficult experience because every day I’m humbled. I go do my TV job. I go there, and I’m grateful for my job. But people ask, “What do you do? Are you an actor?” Of course, I am. That’s why I’m feeding you right now. That’s why I’m giving you drinks right now. “What shows have you been in?” You tell them. “Oh, my God, how wonderful. You made my week. I love seeing that. Why are you here?”

And I say, “Because I’m waiting on my check. I’m waiting on my money. I have to pay my bills.” We are here today because of that *Deadline* article that came out. Whatever the source was—“We’re going to let this bleed out until they lose their houses.”

I wasn’t there. None of us were there to hear it straight from the mouth of whoever it was. But they picked the wrong ones to say this to. “You’re going to lose your house, and you’re going to lose your apartment.” Because if there’s anything that artists are, it’s creative and hustlers. So we’re going to find a way to figure our shit out.

Corvin: I’m fortunate enough to be a full-time working actor, or before this strike, I was.

But that took 10 years. And I’m not making crazy money. People think that we’re all Hollywood celebrities making a bunch of money. But there’s about 150,000 members of this union. Not all of them are George Clooney or Meryl Streep.

Many of them, like my friend here, are working day jobs. These corporate executives think that we’re going to lose our houses ... the majority of us make a living from their day jobs so that they can have a career in this industry or make enough just to qualify for the health insurance. It’s \$26,000 [a year] to qualify. And 87 percent of the union members do not make that annually.

WSWS: What is the importance of a joint writers-actors strike?

Corvin: Again, people think that we’re writers and we’re actors, that this is just a Hollywood problem. But I want to just remind people about the beginning of COVID in 2020. We remember seeing all those videos about Amazon workers being worked to death under harsh conditions, unable to even go to the bathroom, and the scare tactics that were employed on them to not unionize.

One of the networks we are fighting is Amazon Prime Video. It’s the same company. We’re seeing the same tactics used on two different groups of people in two different branches of their workforce. UPS will be striking. Some of those UPS people ...

Val: They honked loud as hell for us!

Corvin: That’s the same union of people [the Teamsters] who drive us to and from the set. Right. So, it’s like the hair and makeup people on Broadway. They’re fighting Broadway and Disney Theatrics. Disney owns part of Broadway. They also own Disney+. You don’t have to be an actor to get what this is.

WSWS: Are art and capitalism incompatible?

Val: In late stage capitalism, when we get to extremes, extreme wealth, extreme greed? Sure.

Corvin: These companies are now corporate conglomerates, where our entire industry is just one folder on a table full of folders of other projects. This money, this greed, could ultimately end art as an industry in general, or at least in this industry.

Molly and Becky, writers

WSWS: Why are you striking?

Molly: It’s been really hard to get jobs the past couple of years because they’ve been cutting down writers’ rooms so much and still paying writers the same rate. It used to be eight to 10 writers writing a season of television; now it’s one or two. Studios are forcing tighter and tighter

timelines for these writers to deliver and not paying them more. So, essentially, you can't make a living as a writer anymore. The past couple of years I've had to work in restaurants and things like that to make ends meet.

WSWS: What's the significance of a combined strike by writers and actors?

Molly: All production has stopped, which is great. The picket lines have doubled in size, which is awesome. It's just more leverage against the studio.

Becky: It's a matter of recognizing what we all have in common. Sure, actors may be the face of these things, but we are all the labor. We are the ones who are getting screwed. Us, them, a lot of the directors. Everyone's getting screwed except for a few people at the top.

Movies and television don't exist without all of us.

WSWS: What about the issue of residuals?

Molly: I have never in my career received residuals, ever, because I've only written for streaming services, and that's just something that's completely foreign to me. In the time of my career, it just hasn't existed.

In terms of the broader significance of the strike, I think post-pandemic, we're seeing a huge movement of labor realizing their value. Before in my industry and also in the hospitality industry, you were replaceable, but then a million people in the United States died, and we realized, "Oh, the worker is not replaceable anymore. The worker is key."

WSWS: What about greater realism in film and television?

Molly: It's unfortunate to see how many reboots and sequels and replays are happening instead of investing in real human stories and individual, modern, pressing issues as opposed to superheroes. There's always going to be a place for superheroes. We all want to have that escapism and be able to manage that. But where is the new? Where is the innovation? Where is the exciting? I don't think anyone cares about telling those interesting stories anymore.

If we think about even the most successful show this year, which was *Succession*, it was still a story about billionaires. It was a story about the one percent. It was a satire, and it was a takedown, it was very cognizant about how much that one percent has taken over the way we all conduct our lives. But I think that there are too many people who see *Succession* as aspirational and don't take it as the cutting satire it is supposed to be.

WSWS: What would you as writers say to the readers of the WSWS around the world?

Molly: Things seem really scary right now. We read these comments from the big production company that they're going to starve us out, that they're going to just wait till we all lose our homes and get into a doom spiral. But coming out here and marching and seeing how much solidarity there is, and how much dancing and joy there is being together, has really lifted my spirits and made me believe that this is a battle we're going to win. It's just going to take time, but we're going to win it.

Becky: AI can come for anyone. You think your job is safe? It's not. We're fighting for limits on AI now that every industry needs. So because we're fighting for it now, it's your future. It's my future. It's everyone's future. So just be ... on ... guard.

Julia, member of United Scenic Artists Local 829

WSWS: Why did you join the picket line?

Julia: It's about something much bigger than these contracts. This is about the people at the top, who have organized the system so they can profit the most, pushing out the lowest level of labor so they can continue to profit. And they don't care about the jobs that could be lost. They

don't care about the working conditions that have slowly gone down—quickly gone down, actually.

They just want things created so quickly that we're working in such unsafe standards in terms of how fast they want to pump out this content. And it's not just they want us to do our jobs at a breakneck speed, but they want all of the crews to be working on top of each other.

So it's crowded. We have riggers working on top of carpenters and scenics. And not only is it unsafe, it's completely unnecessary. There's no reason for us to have to work that quickly and that unsafely to get this stuff done. We're making TV shows and movies here. We're not curing the sick.

It's the dignity of having a job that you like. Isn't that supposed to be what the American dream is all about? You like showing up to work. You like what you do. You're proud to do the work that you do that has slowly deteriorated.

If you're on set, you might be working a regular 14-hour day, five days.

It's unsafe to work that many hours and then commute home. People are falling asleep in their cars.

We're working middle class people, and they're squeezing us out to be lower and lower and lower than middle class. So where do you think this is going to go? What's going to happen? I don't know.

Another scenic artist who preferred to remain nameless

WSWS: Why are you on the picket line?

Scenic Artist: We don't scab, so we're not going to cross the picket line. We're here for fair wages. And they need to control AI. You can't replace human stories that people can tell. A machine is never going to be able to do it. It's already not fair. The residuals are nothing for these guys, and it's a crime.

I'm a scenic artist, so I paint, I sculpt. We do the wallpaper. We make the spaces that they're in look real. We have other folks here who are involved in all parts of it because it's a big production.

It's not just us. It's unions across the board. It's the political climate we're in right now. We're coming up to an election, and we're either going to be still a democracy, somewhat of a democracy, or we're just tipping into fascism. You know, if a Republican gets into office, they're going to try to take our union power away.

WSWS: What about Biden stopping the rail strike last year?

Scenic Artist: It's really screwed up, especially because Biden posed as a pro-union guy. We saw that corporate money was able to push that in a terrible direction. We obviously supported the railroad workers, and they should be entitled to more time off and better pay, to be treated better than they already are.

WSWS: What about the state of American society?

Scenic Artist: We don't need more billionaires, okay? They need to be paying their fair share. An ethical billionaire does not exist. Bob Iger and the other CEOs, if anyone's going to get replaced by AI, it should be them. You're just a mouthpiece that makes millions of millions of dollars per year.

Two New York City high school students, Addy and Alex

Addy: We're not really writers. We're just union supporters. I'm an aspiring writer, and I'm looking at what's happening in the industry, and

I have dreams to write, and it doesn't seem fair. It doesn't seem like people can make a living off of it anymore.

Alex: I'm trying to go into the creative arts. The fact that writers are not being paid fairly, the fact that AI is a threat to the future of entertainment, all that is incredibly concerning.

I want to make sure that there's a future for art, there's a future for writing.

WSWS: What is the most significant thing about this strike to you?

Addy: I think more solidarity amongst labor movements in general. We're seeing UPS workers who may be striking. It's coming from everywhere. It's about being more aware of the strikes that are happening around the world and them being inspired by each other.

Also, it's an important education for people like us who are not part of the union, but who thought that all actors get paid enough, to learn that only 2 percent of actors really don't need a second job. They're just like us, and they're fighting for their ability to get paid for their work, just like us. And so I think having solidarity with them is important.

WSWS: We do you think about American capitalism?

Addy: Anti-capitalist!

Alex: I've seen parts of my family get ill, and they don't have the money for the surgery they get. It sets them back years. It's a terrible system. There's so many facets of this and it's so hard to fix it. Our generation has to deal with that.

WSWS: What about the decline in the quality of films and television? Could the strike bring more realism?

Alex: In the age of streaming, shows are being cranked out like crazy. Marvel under Disney is just making content constantly. We were talking about how actors here want to do more meaningful work. People are becoming desensitized to this constant cycle of media that's getting lower and lower in quality.

I wholeheartedly agree that we need to focus more on realism, but also quality, good writing. The studios need to take more time, and they need to pay the writers.

Addy: Netflix gives shows just a few days to prove they're exciting and that people want to see them. That just ruins how we enjoy series, how we support creative work because everything is put under so much pressure. We're not allowed to really have time to enjoy.



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