

Film and television strikers in Los Angeles are determined to fight: “It’s theft. That’s what capitalism comes down to.”

Marc Wells
26 July 2023

Despite record high temperatures, 11,000 writers in the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and 65,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) continue to walk the picket lines in a now 13-week-long fight against the major networks and studios represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

Major concerns are being raised by actors and writers about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its potential to replace tens of thousands of entertainment workers. According to *Variety*, a basic agreement was struck between SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP where “performers must give ‘informed consent’ [to use their likeness in future projects] and that the right to use AI on additional projects must be separately bargained.”

No one trusts the vague character of this proposal. In the 2007-2008 WGA strike, the seeds of the streaming residual losses that followed were planted in that contract. The WGA settled for a maximum fixed amount instead of a share in the revenues. At the time, the British business journal *The Economist* wrote: “The devil, as usual, is in the details. ... The writers asked for a straightforward percentage of gross receipts, but settled for fixed dollar amounts, which limits their earnings compared with the studios.”

A similar situation is shaping up, except now it involves writers and actors. As a measure of the corporations’ readiness, Netflix currently has a job post for “Product Manager – Machine Learning Platform” paying a range of \$300,000-900,000.

“It’s just like Salma Hayek in *Black Mirror*,” said Cisco, an actor on the picket line Wednesday at the Warner Bros. Studios. He was referring to the episode

“Joan is Awful,” where Hayek replays the life of another woman who had signed away rights to her likeness. “And it’s crazy that it’s coming from Netflix!”

Critical of the use of AI to replace talent for the sake of profit, Cisco said, “As an artist, there’s a soul, there’s a spirit, there’s humanity in our art that you’re going to miss out on screen.” Applied in real life, “Think about a play done with nothing but holograms. You go to a theater, you go to Broadway, and it’s nothing but holograms. There goes Denzel on hologram.”

The ability of the owners of AI to control the narrative of a script was also raised as a concern. “You bring in a script and by the time the process [of AI revising and editing] is done, it’s a totally different movie that you didn’t even sign on to.”

Cisco reflected on the 2007-2008 WGA streaming debacle: “I don’t understand why we didn’t [ask for more], with new media. You know, to do a Coca-Cola commercial and get \$500 and see that air thousands of times all over YouTube, all over the internet, and I’m sitting there asking my agent: ‘So when’s the next check coming?’ And they’re like ‘That’s it, it’s new media,’ like that was the future you should have known! And now they say: ‘We don’t know how big it’s gonna be. We just want the option.’”

On the basis of these past experiences, Cisco expressed concerns about the union leadership: “I got a funny feeling SAG is not going to put up the manpower to fight, because over the years I feel like they’ve been siding with the producers lots of the times.” Sharing his own experience, he recalled: “I used to do commercial extra work and see myself make a claim [for residual

payments]. Next thing you know I got upgraded, I'm getting my residuals. And then towards the end they [SAG-AFTRA] were like, 'I don't know, we feel like they're right, you're not seen enough, you're not in there.'

"I was like, 'It's clearly me. And then it was the same set where the director said he couldn't upgrade me right now, but he would place me somewhere.' And then here comes hair and makeup. 'Cisco, you're in the right place. You're perfect.' I made the claim, and they sided with the producers and the ad agency. It blew my mind. It was plain as day."

Cisco discussed the issue of wealth: "The only way they're going to feel it is if their own pockets start to hurt. When they start to lose a home. One of their 10 homes, right?" Asked if the working class, united, took back the wealth corporations stole, he replied, "Took it. I like that word. Took it back. I think that's great, and I'd be in the front of the line to help do that. How we're going to do that is a whole other thing, but you know sometimes you can't just beg. Somehow, we have to take what's ours. We created it. They didn't get rich just from doing it on their own. They didn't sit in an empty studio and just go 'poof'."

Actress Chau Sa and writer Vincent also spoke to broader questions. "There's a great percentage of people who can't even meet the minimum to get health care, and I think that speaks volumes about the state of affairs," Chau Sa said. "Times have changed, and working people are getting more confident about having their voices heard. People have just had enough. And with it being hard to afford basic necessities, with prices rising, everyone just feels more hugely affected by it. I think at this point it's survival."

Speaking about the nature of social relations, Chau Sa commented: "We all work as a collective and as a community. I think the separation is with the people who are at the top, who don't have compassion for the world as a whole."

Vincent added, "I'm a veteran. So coming from the military side, I've seen people step on each other's toes just to get on, you know, another little piece of decoration on their collar. Corporations work the same way."

Asked about US imperialism in light of his experience in the military, he replied: "It's f***ed up. We see it everywhere. Seeing the film industry as it is,

there's a lot of parallels. The chain of command is one of them. We'll never meet Bob Iger, we'll never meet some of these CEOs who sit in their spaces and look down on the streets and see people picketing and giggle. I never met my commanders and yet we're getting direct orders from those people, and they're profiting off of our labor, off of our injuries, off of our experiences and our traumas and our stories. And that's, you know, it's theft. You think about it, it's theft. That's what capitalism comes down to, it's theft."

Asked about the necessity of workers taking matters in their own hands and democratically deciding on the organization of global society, Vincent observed: "We come with different experiences, different people, different individuals within a collective group for a cause, we can come up with different ideas. We can come up with different solutions for different problems. We're going to give you our ideas, you're going to bounce it off of somebody else, and that's how we're going to keep moving forward."

"And if we don't do that democratically, we're going to keep doing the same thing that the one person is telling us to do, even if it's not working. Instead of just six people in a boardroom making all the decisions, we have to ask where is the decision of your janitor? Where is the decision of your mail clerk? If everyone has a share, everyone cares."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact