

"We refuse to give up"

## US actors, writers speak about lengthy strike and the crisis facing their profession

Kimie Saito, Gabriel Black, Jacob Crosse  
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Film and television writers in the US, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) are more than 100 days into their historic strike. For over a month, actors, affiliated with the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), have joined the writers, turning the struggle into the first “dual strike” since 1960.

According to media reports about the WGA strike, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) offered a counterproposal to the union on August 11. Reports suggest that the WGA leadership is willing to concede on several of its already inadequate demands, including how many writers are in a given “writers room.”

As the WSWS warned last week, the determined, courageous strike is in danger of being sold out through these closed-room negotiations. Were the WGA to demobilize writers and send them back to work, on the basis of a concessionary contract, it would empower the AMPTP and SAG-AFTRA leadership to reach an even worse deal behind the backs of actors.

*The WSWS spoke to several actors and writers at picket lines, and over the phone, in Los Angeles this past week. They spoke about the strike but also the broader struggles of the working class erupting across the country.*

**Jon**, an actor and member of SAG-AFTRA for 40 years, spoke to the WSWS outside Netflix headquarters.

Responding to the anonymous studio executive who told *Deadline* last month, “The endgame is to allow things to drag on until union members start losing their apartment and losing their houses,” Jon said, “I believe in that [corporate] world there is a disdain for labor, for workers. We’re treated as cattle, and we are looked down upon.”

Reflecting on the general explosion of workers struggles, Jon commented, “I think it’s a very critical time, and I think it’s important that all these various workers are going on strike.”

“I feel that the so-called powers that be in the union were going to roll over and take anything,” Jon said in regards to the rank and file letter warning to the SAG-AFTRA leadership before the strike. “I think those people that did that open letter knew. They knew the union leaders were going to bend over, and they said, ‘We’re not going to stand by you.’ I’m thankful

to them.”

**Leila**, a striking SAG-AFTRA actress, whose husband is in the WGA, spoke about the interim agreements SAG-AFTRA signed, without membership approval, allowing certain “independent” productions to continue.

“I don’t see people on the picket line making excuses or licking boots. We are tired and angry, especially over the interim agreements.” Originally, “I received push back from some people who were saying ‘No, the negotiators know what they’re doing,’ but then [actress] Sarah Silverman spoke up and opposed these agreements, and I thank her for doing that, because I think it gave voice to people who were too afraid to speak.”

Leila noted that the so-called interim agreements were still in place and that the stipulations essentially encourage scabbing against the writers’ strike.

“Who else’s films were they shooting before, if they weren’t by WGA writers? I’ve never been on a set where there aren’t writers. So now you’re shooting a set without the writer there. You’re shooting that writer’s material. Now they’re saying, ‘Oh, there won’t be scripts that were done under a WGA agreement,’ so what are they shooting?”

“We just got the message on Tuesday from the union saying they’re not going to do any more films that were written under the WGA agreement. I was still asking, well, then, whose scripts are you doing? And why is that? How do you shoot a movie without a WGA script?”

“You’re encouraging scabs, right? There is no set you’re ever on where there isn’t writing and rewriting. So even for actors to be doing the interim agreement, they would have to be on a set shooting a movie without the writer who wrote that script there for the rewrite. So who’s rewriting the lines? It’s constant. There is constant rewriting as you’re making a movie. So it’s just so sick.”

Outside Netflix, the WSWS spoke to **Sean**, a 23-year old film school graduate aspiring to join the WGA. He told the WSWS

that he felt “it is a professional obligation, as someone who is trying to join this industry, to be out here.”

While not a member of the WGA, Sean, whose name we changed for anonymity, explained that one thing that worries him is the shrinking number of entry positions that historically have led to a career as a writer.

He continued, “They’re cutting back on the jobs that young people need if they want to break into the profession.” Typically, a younger person could be employed as a production assistant (PA) in and around a writers’ room, sometimes doing menial tasks, but constantly interacting with the writers. Sean explained that traditionally, after a year or so, this could lead to a career as a writer. But those jobs are being cut or being given out without this track in mind.

**Shawntay**, an actress of five years, drew out the relationship of the actors’ strike to the broader working class: “Everyone’s feeling ‘You know what, we’re not about to continue to be misused, we’re not about to continue to be mistreated, and if you do not show us some respect, we’re no longer going to go along with it.’”

Shawntay continued, “I agree with how we’re connected to UPS, yes; also, the hotel workers, yes. I got so excited when I saw the Wendy’s workers [walkout]. The workers were saying, ‘You know what, no, we’re walking out as we should.’” She noted “I read it was 100 degrees in the restaurant where they were working, are you kidding me? As if we do not deserve decency when we work. So I’m absolutely excited for the movement that is happening right now.”

Shawntay also expressed the common willingness and readiness to fight. “You guys,” she said, referring to writers, “are over 100 days in. We are fresh in this for over a month, but it’s still hurting. I know so many actors that are hurting, as well as writers. But even so, even in the heart of the fumes, we refuse to give up.”

Leila spoke about the general conditions facing actors and writers:

“For actors, writers, we’re used to being underemployed, treated horribly, slightly desperate, unsure. So I feel like we’ve been training for this moment our whole life. We lost our home during the last strike. We have enormous credit card debt ... We are so enormously [screwed], but we’ve been living like this for decades. So there’s no reason to take a bad deal. And especially as the union got us all out here striking ... We’re already doing it. Don’t cave now.”

“I’m friends with workers online,” Leila went on, “through Twitter and so forth, they’ve been talking about going to food banks for quite a while. I know a ton of people online who are really suffering. And obviously not just actors. I mean, this has been going on for years now.”

Turning to the question of union, she said, “SAG is not union [in any real sense of the word]. A union in which 87 percent of its people are living in poverty. You can’t get access to all the jobs that are available as a union member unless you have an

agent who still can’t show you the breakdown, but can submit you for stuff, right? What kind of union doesn’t even let you know who’s hiring? There are so many protections that we should have. It should be a source of embarrassment that 87 percent of your union membership doesn’t make \$26,000 a year [to qualify for health care].”

Leila and the rest of the striking actors receive no strike pay from SAG-AFTRA. As for writers in the WGA, Leila said: “We filed for the strike fund for WGA, we’ve gotten one payment. Then they made us wait six weeks, even though they said it would be a monthly thing.”

“So,” she continued, “all of a sudden we were like, ‘Oh my God, now we’re really in debt.’ So it took a lot longer. We had asked for a slight increase. They didn’t give it to us. And then we just got a form, so we’re under [my husband’s] Writers Guild health insurance. So obviously he hasn’t had an assignment this year and you can only do it on assignments, not on residuals or specs sales or whatever. He didn’t have those either. So we’re not going to make the cutoff for Writers Guild health insurance this year.”

Leila explained that there is a points-based system that they could use to re-up their insurance, but not every writer has access to the necessary amount of points to continue his or her insurance.

“You only get a certain number for a lifetime,” she explained. “So if it happens too many times you’re just screwed. But the union knows nobody’s working right now. So you would think they would at least keep people’s insurance going.”

Like many workers, Leila rejects the notion that it’s “normal” to get infected with COVID-19 repeatedly on the job. “I think COVID protections on set are crucial. We had fantastic protocols in place before [SAG-AFTRA president] Fran Drescher worked to take them away, which puts everyone on set in danger, as well as their families.”

She agreed with that the negotiations between the union and the companies should be live-streamed. “It should be like C-SPAN. There should be that transparency.”



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