

As Writers Guild positions itself to make a deal, isolation of actors' and writers' strike remains greatest danger

David Walsh
30 August 2023

Some 11,000 film and television writers have been on strike in the US for four months, 65,000 actors for more than a month and a half. These workers, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) respectively, have been conducting a brave, determined struggle against some of the largest corporations in the world.

Thousands have walked the picket lines in extreme heat, experiencing increasing economic hardship as the weeks have gone by. One factor no doubt keeping up the spirits of the writers and actors is the knowledge that they have vast public support: the mega-corporate chiefs are widely despised.

Faced with contracts expiring for the WGA, Directors Guild of America (DGA) and SAG-AFTRA, the clumsy, cruel plan of the conglomerates was transparent. They intended to allow the WGA to walk out and expected to reach deals with the DGA, which they did, and SAG-AFTRA, allowing them to corner and crush the writers.

A July 11 article in *Deadline*, based on conversations with studio executives, spelled this out quite explicitly. The companies had no intention of negotiating with the striking writers, the article explained. One individual, familiar with the views of industry executives, told *Deadline*, “I think we’re in for a long strike, and they’re going to let it bleed out.”

“Receiving positive feedback from Wall Street since the WGA went on strike May 2,” the article went on, “Warner Bros Discovery, Apple, Netflix, Amazon, Disney, Paramount and others have become determined to ‘break the WGA,’ as one studio exec blatantly put it. ... ‘The endgame is to allow things to drag on until union members start losing their apartments and losing their houses,’” a studio executive told *Deadline*. “Acknowledging the cold-as-ice approach, several other sources reiterated the statement.”

This was an open declaration of war on the writers and the workers in the industry generally.

The uprising by SAG-AFTRA members, reflected in the open letter eventually signed by 3,000 performers calling on the union’s officials not to sell them out, which made possible the actors’ July 14 walkout, threw a monkey wrench into the companies’ plans.

On August 11, nearly 15 weeks into the writers’ strike, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) finally offered a counterproposal to the WGA’s demands. Four days later, the WGA came back with its positions.

On August 21, the companies summoned the WGA leaders to meet the following day with a group of industry titans—something along the lines of feudal lords permitting their peons to enter their presence.

As the WGA explains in an update, the “invitation to meet with Bob Iger [of Disney], Donna Langley [of Universal], Ted Sarandos [of

Netflix], David Zaslav [of Warner Bros. Discovery] and Carol Lombardini [president of the AMPTP] ... was accompanied by a message that it was past time to end this strike and that the companies were finally ready to bargain for a deal.”

Instead, writes the WGA, “on the 113th day of the strike—and while SAG-AFTRA is walking the picket lines by our side—we were met with a lecture [from the CEOs] about how good their single and only counteroffer was.” The WGA negotiators, in the words of a guild update, “explained all the ways in which their counter’s limitations and loopholes and omissions failed to sufficiently protect writers from the existential threats that caused us to strike in the first place.” In other words, the companies’ proposal was miserable and a further provocation, part of the all-out war they are prosecuting against the writers and actors.

At the meeting, the CEOs announced their plans to go over the heads of the WGA directly to the membership by releasing their offer “within the next 24 hours.” In fact, they issued a six-page document some 20 minutes after the August 22 meeting ended. To this date, there is no indication of any support among writers for the deal.

On the all-important issues of staffing, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and residuals, the companies have not essentially budged an inch, offering vague commitments at best, not worth the paper they are written on. Typical is the evasive, arrogant response of the companies to revelations about the scandalous amounts—mere pennies—writers (and actors) are receiving in residual payments from popular programs on streaming services. According to the WGA, “the companies say they have made a major concession by offering to allow six WGA staff to study limited streaming viewership data for the next three years, so we can return in 2026 to ask once again for a viewership-based residual. In the meantime, no writer can be told by the WGA about how well their project is doing, much less receive a residual based on that data.”

The WGA and SAG-AFTRA leaderships are looking for a deal that they can “sell” to their members. As of yet, the AMPTP has not seen fit to offer enough crumbs to fill the bill. They are remaining intransigent, with the full support of Wall Street and the Biden administration (although the latter has issued hypocritical statements of “support” to the strikers).

These are companies with hundreds of billions of dollars in assets, which can withstand a strike for months. No doubt they are experiencing some pain, but they can endure temporary discomfort in the cause of “breaking” the writers and actors, and the industry workforce generally. Moreover, Disney, Amazon, Netflix, Warner Bros and the rest are acting here on behalf of the US ruling elite *as a whole*. They are determined to “teach” not only the writers and actors, but the entire working class, an invaluable lesson: This is the treatment you will receive if you dare to oppose the dictates of the corporate oligarchy, being starved and driven back to work.

Their message is: The companies are all-powerful. In reality, they are not, and workers have a growing sense of their own immense power, but this will not be taken forward by the WGA and SAG-AFTRA leaderships. The latter have no strategy or intention to mount the type of struggle necessary to counter the class war of the corporations.

The WGA recently issued a report, "The New Gatekeepers—How Disney, Amazon, and Netflix Will Take Over Media," which describes "a future of increased market power that could soon leave just three companies controlling what content is made, what consumers can watch, and how they can watch it." The study asserts that pay and working conditions for writers "have become so dire, and media conglomerates so unresponsive, that 11,500 writers went on strike in May 2023. Without intervention, these conglomerates will seize control of the media landscape and the streaming era's advances for creativity and choice will be lost." It further points out that "Wall Street is pushing media towards an environment of comfortable collusion among a small number of mega-firms."

An organization dedicated to the interests of the working class would instantly set out a course of action to resist and defeat these monopolists. Instead, the WGA pathetically suggests new government regulations be implemented, something that will never happen under either the Democrats or Republicans.

In the face of the ruthless conglomerates, driven by the objective crisis of American capitalism to drastically lower costs and cut their joint workforce, the WGA can only claim that the companies position is "irrational" because the guild's "fair and reasonable" proposals would cost the giant firms so little: only 0.006 percent of Amazon's revenues, 0.027 percent of NBC Universal's, 0.088 percent of Disney's, etc.

An organization of struggle would be ashamed to boast about how miserable its demands were! The WGA goes on: "Despite the AMPTP's attempt at a detour around us, we remain committed to direct negotiations with the companies. That's actually how a deal gets made and the strike ends. That will be good for the rest of the industry and the companies as well."

The WGA may not have the same number of highly paid bureaucrats as the UAW or the Teamsters, but the union apparatus it is not one iota more progressive or representative of its membership. It negotiates and speaks for a privileged, upper-middle-class layer, tied to the Democratic Party and its orbit and committed to the existing economic and social setup.

The current course of the strike can only lead to disaster, the latest disaster in a series going back at least to the conclusion of the 2007-08 strike, which laid the basis for the impoverishment of writers and actors over the intervening years.

The isolation of the writers-actors' strike must be broken. This involves a fight not only against the bankrupt policies of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA officials, but against the deliberate isolation of the struggle by the entire AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Working with the Biden administration, the union bureaucracy has blocked strikes by 22,000 dockworkers and 340,000 UPS workers that would have immensely strengthened the writers-actors' strike.

But more battalions of workers are coming into struggle in the coming weeks, including 170,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in the US and Canada and more than 85,000 Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers in seven different US states and the District of Columbia.

The great strength of the working class lies in its strategic position in production and its social power. No section of workers can take on the full strength of the ruling class by itself, and that is why all of these struggles have to be united. But this requires breaking the stranglehold of the trade union bureaucracy over every section of the working class.

A new strategy is necessary, bound up with the building of rank-and-file committees, devoted to the interests of the actors and writers and not to what "will be good for the rest of the industry and the companies."

What's "good for ... the companies," as they openly proclaim, is the destruction of the writers' and actors' working and living conditions. The answer to that is the direct appeal to workers in the entertainment industry and every other sector. The cause of the actors and writers must become the cause of the entire working class, the signal for a general offensive against the corporations and their governments.

As the comment posted yesterday on the WSWS by a striking actor argued: "The only way to fight against these international conglomerates who own every aspect of our world is to form rank-and file committees, mobilizing workers from every sector of industry and making our demands known. Now is not the time for concessions that will only bring about our own demise. We must band together and bring these pathologically greedy CEOs to their knees. This is class war. We need to start acting like it."

Rank-and-file committees among the actors and writers would fight to extend the strike and shut down the entertainment industry as a whole, not going to Teamsters and IATSE officials, who will only betray them, but to the rank and file. This is unthinkable to the WGA and SAG-AFTRA, because it would cut across its relations with the other union bureaucracies and the Democrats, who reign in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and other centers of production and whose officials the WGA and SAG-AFTRA repeatedly bring before their "solidarity" rallies.

Rank-and-file committees would put an immediate end to the 140 "interim agreements," allowing productions to go on, negotiated by SAG-AFTRA, which demonstrate the union's capitulatory stance. Such committees would call for an end to secret, behind-closed-doors negotiations, raise inflation-busting wage and residual increases, fight for enlarged and guaranteed staffing of writers' rooms, demand the opening of the companies' books so that writers and actors can see the reality for themselves, insist on banning any AI that affects workers' jobs or conditions—and make these proposals nonnegotiable.

As part of their thoroughgoing acquiescence to the capitalist status quo, the WGA (and SAG-AFTRA) leaders accept the current artistic and cultural conditions, which condemn so many of their members to writing and performing in rubbish and betraying their own finest artistic interests and aspirations. Rank-and-file committees would also have the responsibility to encourage, publicize and support film and television work that sheds light on the realities of American social life, including working class life. Relying on the "good will" of the companies to permit shows and films from time to time that shed light on conditions is a losing proposition. Such a campaign would inevitably entail the fight for the genuinely democratic and socialist reorganization of culture and society, in the interests of the general population.

Following abjectly in the wake of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA officialdoms, justifying and legitimizing their every action, is *Jacobin* magazine, the mouthpiece of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a non-socialist wing of the very capitalist Democratic Party.

In its latest piece, "The Hollywood Studios Still Aren't Serious About Ending the Writers' Strike," *Jacobin* works away at what it does best: sowing complacency and lulling to sleep as many people as are susceptible to its arguments as possible.

After detailing the companies' actions in their recent negotiations with the WGA, the article asserts that "the executives have yet again proven themselves to be clueless: there was never a chance that WGA leaders were going to accept an early-stage counterproposal from the AMPTP that has so many remaining issues. Even after more than one hundred days of a nationwide strike, the studio heads are still monumentally out of touch."

The studio executives, in fact, are not "clueless" and "out of touch," they are operating directly and coldbloodedly in line with the needs of the companies, the financial aristocracy, the Biden White House and the entire American ruling class.

Jacobin's confidence in the WGA leadership is touching, but, more importantly, in passing, the magazine gives its stamp of approval to the strategy of the WGA and AFL-CIO apparatus, the quarantining of the writers and actors, a recipe for defeat. *Jacobin* will bear a share of the responsibility for that if the situation is not turned around, through the growth of rank-and-file action.

We urge writers and actors to consider these questions and initiate rank-and-file committees independent of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA officialdom.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact