

WGA co-chair Chris Keyser's Labor Day message: The union apparatus prepares to sell out writers' strike

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The Writers Guild of America (WGA) released a video on Labor Day featuring Negotiating Committee co-chair Chris Keyser. Some 11,000 WGA members have been on strike since May 2. Tens of thousands of actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), have been on strike since July 14.

In the course of the eight-and-a-half-minute video, Keyser describes the ruthless treatment writers have been receiving at the hands of the studios and streaming services, only to declare near the conclusion, “We have never been the companies’ enemies. We are not their enemies now. We are their creative partners, first and foremost.”

Keyser represents a certain social type, affluent, well-connected in the industry, intimately tied to the Democratic Party, that controls the WGA and SAG-AFTRA union apparatus.

At one point, Keyser lists some of the writers’ complaints: “The erosion of pay. The abuse of screenwriters. The failure to protect Appendix A writers [writers on quiz shows, comedy-variety programs, documentaries and news programs] in the move to streaming. The dismantling of the writing process in episodic television. The threat of AI [artificial intelligence]. The refusal to provide streaming residuals that grow with viewership. Each of these things is an existential issue for some or all of us.”

The term “existential” has been thrown around a good deal in this strike. When writers and actors use the word, it expresses the genuine fear they may not be able to continue in their profession, that the big entertainment companies have made conditions financially impossible for thousands of film and television writers and performers. They have been walking picket lines for months, making great sacrifices, because many have reached the point of no return. “We have no choice,” is a phrase that numerous actors and writers repeat. The present conflict with the employers and its outcome are life-and-death matters to countless strikers.

But it does not mean the same thing to the WGA or SAG-AFTRA leaders. It cannot. Otherwise, it would be impossible for figures like Keyser to describe the threats as “existential”

and then propose to be good partners with utterly ruthless, predatory giants such as Amazon, Disney, Netflix, Warner Bros. Discovery and the rest. The executives of these firms, with the open backing of Wall Street and the more surreptitious support of the White House, have dedicated themselves to “breaking” the writers, as one of them brazenly told *Deadline* in July, forcing them to lose their homes and apartment, driving them to destitution in the cause of profit-making.

In fact, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, this is what is taking place now. The publication reported Tuesday that a “record number of Hollywood workers” are facing evictions and seeking rent assistance. Bob Beitcher of the Motion Picture & Television Fund told the *Reporter* that people are “becoming unhoused, they’re being evicted from their apartments and they’re not paying their mortgages so eventually they will lose their homes as well. We’re talking to people who are living in their cars, in some cases with their families.” The workers are being hit both by the strike and the end to COVID tenant protections in portions of Los Angeles County.

The defeat of the strike, the submission of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA to the companies’ terms, would mean continuing and even more devastating declines in incomes and jobs for tens of thousands in the industry and their being driven out of it in large numbers.

WGA officials like Keyser, an influential writer-producer, refer to the crisis facing writers and actors only as part of an effort to betray and shut down the strike.

So, Keyser can point out perfectly accurately that “there is no point in going back to jobs that may not be there in a year or two. No point in going back to jobs that don’t sustain a career. No point in us permitting the AMPTP to enforce a system that bankrupts our health and pension plan to the devastation of every writer,” and meanwhile assert that the WGA does not “begrudge the companies their success or deny their struggles. We all must succeed together,” and, as cited above, “We have never been the companies’ enemies.”

The companies recognize the actors and writers as their sworn enemies. They have every intention of “succeeding” at

the latter's expense. This is what they have been doing, with the unions' compliance, for decades. Keyser was president of the WGA West from 2011 to 2015. What did he do to stop the bleeding?

Keyser is typical of the social layer that leads the entertainment industry unions.

In the course of his recent message, Keyser paid tribute to labor. "That is where things stand on Labor Day, 2023," he argued, "which is a celebration of the dignity and value of those who work. An acknowledgement that this country was built by the people who take home a paycheck."

But Keyser's ambition and career path led him to work for a notorious strike breaker. According to his official WGA biography, Keyser "is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law School" who "began his career as a political speechwriter. He was the chief speechwriter for [Arizona] Governor Bruce Babbitt's presidential campaign in 1988."

As governor, Babbitt had played an infamous role only a few years before in the bitter strike of 3,000 copper miners employed by the Phelps Dodge Corporation in Ajo, Morenci, Douglas and Clifton, Arizona, which began in June 1983 and lasted for three years. In fact, the strike was finally broken in 1986, the first year that Keyser apparently wrote a speech for Babbitt, or that there is any public record of one. Has he ever been asked to account for this?

As the WSWS recently explained, in introducing an interview with the *de facto* leader of the Phelps Dodge strike, Jorge O'Leary, "strikers from 13 local unions fought a ruthless company and its thugs, police, the National Guard, the Reagan administration, the state's Democratic governor [Babbitt], the National Labor Relations Board, federal court injunctions, and the AFL-CIO, which isolated the strike in order to ensure its defeat."

The WSWS interviewer, Eric London, asked O'Leary about the role of the Democratic Party in the strike. London said, "This was when the union-busting Ronald Reagan was president, but at the time Arizona had a Democratic governor, Bruce Babbitt, right? What did the strikers call him?"

O'Leary responded,

Scabbitt! His last name was Babbitt, but we called him Scabbitt. The governor said we have to follow the law, and there was an injunction but the judge said there couldn't be more than 10 people in the picket line, so they were taking sides right away. You don't have a picket line if you let the scabs get in, you lose the strike that way. We held our picket lines until this judge made the injunction and we moved the picket line to Clifton to stop the scabs from coming to the mine. ...

They sent soldiers, tanks, big trucks, helicopters and planes. It was revolution—they were intimidating. When we went on the picket line, that's when the National

Guard [sent by Babbitt] and the police came and chased everybody out and beat them up, and it was really sad to see that.

Another commentator described "a miles-long convoy of armored tanks, vehicles, and Huey helicopters, fully equipped with armed soldiers and SWAT teams." All of this was "unleashed by Arizona governor Bruce Babbitt to quash the Phelps Dodge copper strike."

This is Keyser's pedigree. His involvement with official Democratic Party politics has continued. Another biography observes that Keyser subsequently "served as partner and co-founder of the political media company, First Tuesday Media, which made political ads and content for Democrats and progressive causes and which garnered numerous Pollie Awards (the political advertising equivalent of the television Emmys) for their efforts." The *Washington Post* reported in 2008 that a group of producers, Keyser among them, and political figures had launched First Tuesday Media with "an eye toward playing a major role in the 2008 election." The "face of the group" was Laura Nichols, longtime aide to Democrat Rep. Richard Gephardt. First Tuesday Media created commercials for Barack Obama, among others.

This biography alone helps make the case for rank-and-file committees, free from the tentacles of the strike-breaking, warmongering Democratic Party and its corrupt orbit.

Any strategy based on identifying common interests between the conglomerates, the Democrats and the White House, on the one hand, and the actors and writers, on the other, will lead to betrayal and defeat. The companies are not frightened of Keyser and the WGA and SAG-AFTRA leaders, they know them well. They *are* frightened of the possibility of a mass mobilization of workers in the industry, shutting it down, fighting tooth and nail for massive wage and residual increases, the opening of the industry's books and banning AI that affects writers' or actors' jobs. For that, the struggle will have to be taken out of the hands of the union apparatus and democratically controlled, genuinely independent rank-and-file committees organized and set into motion.



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