

Striking writer: “One way or another, these CEOs are going to have to pay back for all the destruction they’ve done”

After months on strike, US film and television writers’ and actors’ anger reaching the boiling point

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7 September 2023

The struggle by 11,000 film and television writers, members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), is now in its fifth month, while 65,000 actors in the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) are nearing the end of their second month on the picket lines.

The militant determination of the writers and actors to fight for decent living standards and a more meaningful future for art and culture have been met with intransigence and outright cruelty by the entertainment mega-corporations united in the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). The companies have made clear their willingness to drive thousands of artists into misery and out of the arts and entertainment industry.

While the WGA and SAG-AFTRA bureaucracies seek to reduce the struggle to mere “greed” on the part of the companies and the lowest economic common denominator, a great deal more is at stake, both in terms of this section of the working class and the implications for millions other workers who have entered into struggle against corporate exploitation.

In crude monetary terms, there are reasons why companies like Warner Bros. Discovery (WBD) would rather lose half a billion dollars than make the slightest concession. The conglomerate announced early this week that it expects 2023 adjusted earnings to be between \$10.5 billion to \$11 billion, down \$500 million from previous estimates. David Zaslav, CEO for Warner Bros. Discovery, made half that amount in 2021.

In its announcement, Warner Bros. commented that while the company was “hopeful” the writers’ and actors’ strikes would be “resolved soon,” it could not “predict when the strikes will ultimately end.” With both guilds still on strike, “the Company now assumes the financial impact to WBD of these strikes will persist through the end of 2023.” Whether this was meant as a threat or not, Wall Street reacted enthusiastically to the

aggressive tone, as WBD stock rose 2 percent on Tuesday.

The giant firms are determined to set a precedent in regard to a number of burning issues, from streaming to artificial intelligence (AI). They are not willing to modify the residual structure they were able to establish thanks to the WGA’s failure and unwillingness to defend writers’ interests in 2007-2008, when streaming was still unexplored territory—similar to AI today. Nor do they want to miss the opportunity of unprecedented profits derived from the control of new technology that will allow them to cut talent costs to a fraction of current payment structures.

Moreover, every large corporation is watching closely, as they are alarmed by the potential of strikes that could unite millions of workers across different industries and bring the economy to a halt in a matter of days. Hundreds of thousands of auto and healthcare workers could enter into struggles in the next few weeks.

The corporations are relying on the union leaderships to prevent such action. The combined case of 340,000 UPS workers and 22,000 West Coast dockworkers illustrates how the collusion of the Teamsters and ILWU bureaucracy with the Biden administration has produced such a result, leaving workers betrayed and suffering further economic losses.

The WGA leadership is ready to play the same role, as Negotiating Committee co-chair Chris Keyser revealed when he declared, “We have never been the companies’ enemies. We are not their enemies now. We are their creative partners, first and foremost.”

Similarly, with all its phony rhetoric about “solidarity,” SAG-AFTRA has prevented video game workers from joining the strike of their fellow union members and only this week began a strike authorization vote. Moreover, the use of “interim agreements,” allowing hundreds of productions to go ahead, has created a surreal situation of internal scabbing that weakens or negates the purpose of strike action.

On the opposite side of the social barricade, workers are showing great fortitude, even as the economic sacrifices begin to take a serious toll on many strikers. The intersection of the strike and the end of COVID-19 moratorium provisions is threatening many writers and actors with extreme hardship, if not homelessness. Evictions are suddenly on the rise, especially in cities like Los Angeles and New York, where the average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$3,500 and \$5,200, respectively. Numerous reports are emerging of workers and their families living in their cars.

Max, an aspiring writer from the Ivory Coast who grew up in France, shared his experience: “Here in LA, people are getting priced out, they have to live in Lancaster or Victorville [60 and 80 miles away]. We want to make a living out of this. Young generations like us want to break in. Shakespeare said, ‘When sorrows come, they come not single spies but in battalions.’ I live in Burbank, and it’s the worst timing. With the [eviction] moratorium being lifted, landlords are coming in with ‘renovictions,’ using a loophole in the Burbank law to actually kick people out if they pay three days late.”

Comparing this to David Zaslav’s hundreds of millions of dollars, Max commented: “It doesn’t make sense, and it’s going to backfire. We are going to appeal to the public, strength is in numbers, united we stand, divided we fall. Everyone should stop working, that would affect the corporations’ pocketbook.”

Asked whether he would consider corporations his “friends,” Max observed: “One way or another, these CEOs are going to have to pay back for all the destruction they’ve done. And it’s not like all these jobs are going to disappear. We are still here. We want to work. We want to write, and we’re not going to disappear, but I think they’re going to have to be punished for what they’ve done. There are people drawing from their pensions to be able to get by. They can’t even afford food now, resorting to food pantries.”

Commenting about the class interests revealed in Chris Keyser’s Labor Day statement, Max expressed concern: “If that’s the case, then we are in a world of trouble because at the very least our leadership should fight for us. We should do like the actors in that letter and say, ‘Hey, if you don’t want to fight for us, we’re going to go and do it ourselves.’ Corporations are not friends. They have a strategy to bleed us out and we have to have our own.

“I don’t know how to organize if the WGA leadership is compromised. But the direction will have to be to reduce the size of the individual’s power. The system is collapsing, we have to be ready to crash it and burn it, and then rebuild a better system from there. They call this free market, there’s nothing free about it, nor fair.”

Looking at the development of American capitalism, Max commented: “I was working on [HBO series] *Hacks* and I told the UPM [unit production manager] how this country was founded, by people coming from all over the world fleeing

aristocratic privileges and exploitation. Hundreds of years later, we have a new aristocracy rising: This is not America, it’s like royalty.”

Gloria, a comedy writer, shared her insights. “I’m here because I want people to be able to have a future as writers. I was privileged and lucky enough to get on a network show, so I had 40 weeks of work, and that was something sustainable. I look at people who are in small mini-rooms just working for a couple of weeks here and there—it’s not a sustainable living. I’m here because I believe we should be able to be creative people and earn a living and be able to take care of our families and things like that.”

She shared her thoughts about the corporations. “I think they are wrong. I’m unclear about what their values are. Because it doesn’t feel like they’re valuing the common good. The only thing that they’re valuing is money. And to me that’s a screwy value, and I think that’s why we’re in the situation that we’re in right now.”

Additionally, she stated, “I don’t see them [the companies] as friendly. I definitely see them as misguided and valuing the wrong thing. And I also just wonder what is the end game? When you have that kind of hoarding of wealth, other people don’t win. What is the plan when people don’t have jobs? It’s dire, it’s awful.”

Gloria elaborated on what inspires her. “I was a stand-up comic before I started writing. I always felt like it was very hard to be funny when you’re struggling. So, I don’t think I’ve found the levity or the irony in it right now because I’m so in it and angry. I’m like ‘burn everything down.’

“I’m angry,” she said, “because I’m watching people being squeezed out; I’m watching people losing their livelihoods. It doesn’t have to be me that it’s happening to. You can look at other people and see that happening and feel anger and sadness and frustration about it. If you value people being able to work, if you value distribution of wealth, if you value everyone having some—if those are the kind of values that you have and you see what’s actually operating and what’s actually happening, then of course you’re affected by it.”

She concluded: “This struggle is about the state of what we want this country and this world to look like in the future. As I get older, instead of getting more conservative, I go more to the left, and I’m just like, this doesn’t work.”



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