

Striker: “We will be here 100 days, 200 days. I’m ready to go five years.”

Millionaire celebrities delay talk show return after Writers Guild announces negotiations with studios, networks

Jacob Crosse, Marc Wells

19 September 2023

In a statement released September 18, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) confirmed the union’s negotiating committee would resume secret talks with the major studios, streaming services and corporate entities represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) on September 20.

Leaving in the dark some 11,000 writers in the WGA who have been on strike since May 2, along with some 66,000 actors in the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) who walked out July 14 in the first “dual strike” of the major entertainment unions in decades, the WGA Negotiating Committee commented in their brief statement: “You might not hear from us in the coming days while we are negotiating.”

Confirming that the WGA Negotiating Committee is preparing to accept concessions to bring an end to the 140-day-long strike, the brief statement continued, “Our focus is getting a fair deal for writers as soon as possible.” The union concluded, “We’ll reach out again when there is something of significance to report.”

The film and television studios and streaming companies, at the behest of Wall Street, are seeking to impose more thoroughly and systematically a developing business model on actors and writers aimed at turning the majority of workers into “gig” or part-time workers, while slashing thousands of jobs through the use of Artificial Intelligence and advanced computer technologies. Demands by writers and actors for higher residuals, job protections and access to the streaming data have been rejected by the corporations.

Since the beginning of the conflict, the AMPTP’s members have made clear their aim is not to come to a “fair deal” with the writers (and actors), but as *Deadline* reported in July, to isolate and “break” the WGA (and SAG-AFTRA), through a strike lasting until “union members start losing their apartments and losing their homes.”

The union leaderships, tied by a thousands threads to the corporations and the Democratic Party and divorced from the rank-and-file, have assisted the conglomerates in implementing their strategy by refusing to expand the struggle to other sections of the working class, despite the reality that the corporate offensive against jobs and conditions is universal. The fight of the writers and actors is the fight of the entire working class. The WGA

and SAG-AFTRA officials are organically incapable of appealing to other workers, because that would cut across their relations with the Teamsters, IATSE and other bureaucracies, and disrupt their relations to the Biden administration and local Democrats. The continued isolation of the strike, for which the AFL-CIO bears major responsibility, remains the greatest danger.

In all their pronouncements, WGA and SAG-AFTRA officials insist on referring to the companies, who are out for workers’ blood, as “our partners,” with whom writers and actors share common interests. (This goes hand in hand with the issuing of hundreds of “interim agreements,” which were never agreed to by the general membership.) On this basis, only betrayal and defeat are possible. An economic, political and cultural state of war exists between Disney, Amazon, Netflix and Warner Bros., on the one hand, and the writers and actors, on the other. Only with that understanding can a serious strategy be worked out.

Writers and actors must be warned, a major sellout that will have long-term consequences for the entire working class is being prepared behind their backs. There is no reason to believe that closed-door negotiations with the intransigent, predatory studios will yield a substantially better offer than the one conveyed by the studios to WGA negotiators last month.

On Monday, NBC News, citing an unnamed source, “familiar with the negotiations” reported that the AMPTP “is not expected to have revised its previous offer from August.” *Variety* similarly wrote that the “two sides remain far apart on streaming residuals and a proposal for a mandatory staffing level in TV writers rooms ... there is still disagreement about whether WGA writers’ work can be used to train AI systems.”

The WGA’s announcement comes on the heels of developments that point to the increasing pressure the union is coming under from powerful sections of the Hollywood establishment to come to an agreement. Last Tuesday, the *Hollywood Reporter* (THR) revealed that several influential showrunners, namely, Kenya Barris (*Black-ish*), Noah Hawley (*Fargo*) and Sam Esmail (*Mr. Robot*) would be meeting on Friday with WGA Negotiating Committee co-chair Chris Keyser in an effort to push through a return to work.

In a fawning tribute published last week ahead of the anticipated meeting, *Variety* hailed Keyser, who served as WGA president from 2011 to 2015,

as “a fresh-faced pragmatist who was unafraid to negotiate.” The industry publication cited a comment by ally Howard Gould, who helped with Keyser’s 2011 campaign for union chief, “It was never ever Chris Keyser’s ambition to lead a strike.”

While the Keyser-showrunners meeting was postponed in the end, because of the impending resumption of negotiations, an unnamed source told THR: “There’s a large sentiment among top showrunners who are saying this can’t be a zero-sum game... [People] are willing to get 70 to 80 percent of the way there and make a deal.”

Along these lines, several significant celebrities, including Bill Maher, Drew Barrymore and Jennifer Hudson, announced last week they would be scabbing on the strike and resuming production of their talk shows without WGA writers. However, by Monday morning, following outrage and protest, and assurances by the WGA that serious negotiations were resuming, all three decided to temporarily pause their programs.

In a Monday morning tweet, Maher wrote, “My decision to return to work was made when it seemed nothing was happening and there was no end in sight to this strike. Now that both sides have agreed to go back to the negotiating table I’m going to delay the return of *Real Time*, for now, and hope they can finally get this done.” Maher is a right-wing, anti-communist Islamophobe, his reputation as an “iconoclast” having long ago worn off.

While such elements are eager to wrap up the strike regardless of the impact it will have on the rank-and-file, striking actors and writers speaking to WSWS reporters on the picket lines Monday rejected continuing behind closed doors negotiations and a settlement that meets none of their demands.

“I wish there was more transparency,” Mara, a striking SAG-AFTRA member told the WSWS. “They go in, they talk, they come out, one side tells us what they think they want us to hear, the other side tells us what they want us to hear, they’re all contradicting each other. I wish it was like an open courtroom where we all get to see what’s going on because I don’t know what you’re doing behind the scenes.”

“And there’s a lot of weird stuff, even with SAG,” she went on. “We had all of June to negotiate. They didn’t come to the table. What makes the union think that just because all of June they didn’t negotiate or they didn’t come to an agreement, you should extend it two more weeks? The premise behind all that was they wanted to promote *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* and have those actors be able to promote the films.”

Mara continued: “I don’t think that it should be secret discussions. We’re sitting here, we’re on the ground, everyone’s striking, some people more than others—regardless, everyone’s going through it, right? This is also our fight. So why are we not privy to what’s happening in the room? What is being said?”

A WGA writer, who wished to remain anonymous, rejected notions that striking workers should be prepared to accept less, “We’re behind the curve. We’re way behind the curve in terms of pay scale. I mean, we’re getting paid what we were getting paid 10 years ago, less, and it’s going down exponentially. So we’re overdue, actually, to be honest with you.”

“The companies and the CEOs are happy to spend money on machines,” the writer added, “happy to spend money on technology. I have a friend who works on the railroads, an engineer on the railroad. The railroad spends the last 20 years trying to reduce the number of people running a

train. They’ve got one engineer on the train, they’ve got one conductor, they want to get rid of the conductor, right? What happens when you do this? You get these rail accidents like what happened in Ohio, in East Palestine.”

Randy, a television announcer with over four decades as a SAG member, explained that actors and writers could not relent on streaming residual cuts and the implementation of AI overseen by the corporations. “I remember,” he explained, “when they told us that cable TV would be nothing because who’s going to pay for television? It’s free over the air. Of course, we negotiated saying, ‘Oh, okay, it’s not worth anything,’ but we know what happened. And DVDs? Who’s going to buy a television show that they could watch for free? So we were asleep for that one also.”

Randy went on, “We’re not going to fall for it with streaming. Streaming is already surpassing broadcast. And our deal with streaming is unknown as far as its legitimacy, because we don’t get to see the ratings. Television broadcast ratings, that’s all public knowledge. But these studios maintain a secret lock on this proprietary information.”

“They keep it all a big secret,” he explained. “They don’t want to pay residuals for performers or writers. They want all the money to themselves. And AI, someone in Silicon Valley must have said, this is how you get rid of these folks on your payroll.”

“It all became corporate and gigantic over the course of the ’60s, ’70s, ’80s. Warner Brothers is now a corporate entity, it’s not four brothers anymore. They’re lost in the ozone. These people don’t operate by the quality of a script, they don’t even operate by box office numbers, they operate by stock price. How high is the stock? What’s the quarterly earnings report? That is life or die for them, not only because they want to please the stockholders, but because that’s how their personal salary and wealth are determined.”

“If you could take all these CEOs,” Randy pointed out “and put them in a conference room for a day—how many scripts do you think they’d come up with? The only thing they’re going to write is a lunch order.”

“If we let it go now, we’ll never get any control of it. We will be here 100 days, 200 days. I’m ready to go five years. I’ve worked 42 years in this business. I have a nest egg. I have a pension. I’m ready to stand here and walk through all the shoes that I own because no one will have the opportunity that I had ever again in this business. You grow up with the dream, ‘I want to be a writer, I want to be an actor, I want to be an announcer,’ whatever the fantasy is. And there was a day when you could make that happen and you could live a life. Now, talented people won’t even come to pursue that dream because it doesn’t pay anything. It’s ridiculous. So, what it means to me is there will be no future generation who had the opportunity I had to make a living doing something I dreamed about as a child.”

Randy concluded, “All they want to do is cut costs. If I were a brilliant writer, I’d go somewhere else other than these studios. Then we all suffer, because then we have crap on the TV and crap on the big screen.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact