

Secret talks between Writers Guild and studios, networks continue for third day: Strikers have a right to know what's going on

David Walsh
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Representatives of the Writers Guild of America (WGA), whose membership has been on strike since May 2, and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) continued secret talks for a third day Friday. Bob Iger of Disney, David Zaslav of Warner Bros. Discover, Ted Sarandos of Netflix and Donna Langley of NBCUniversal have personally intervened in the talks. As of this writing, no news of a tentative settlement had been released.

Hundreds of writers turned out on picket-lines Friday as various rumors circulated. *Deadline* reported that “one of the reasons the picket lines ... were so busy were the rumors that started last night. A deal was going to happen at 6pm. This morning, notes were being frantically exchanged promising a 2pm announcement. Obviously, neither of these things happened, but in spite of that, the writers were in a positive mood.”

In fact, the behind-closed-doors talks represent a grave danger to the striking writers, who have made immense sacrifices over the course of more than 140 days, along with tens of thousands of actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), on picket-lines since July 14.

The conglomerates have made obvious and public their intention to “break” the writers and actors. The entrance into the negotiations this week of Iger, Zaslav, Sarandos and Langley underscores the dangers facing the striking writers and actors. These are ruthless predators, fabulously wealthy themselves and direct agents of the financial oligarchy.

On Thursday, the WGA issued a brief press statement: “The WGA and AMPTP met for bargaining

today and will meet again tomorrow. Your Negotiating Committee appreciates all the messages of solidarity and support we have received the last few days, and ask as many of you as possible to come out to the picket lines tomorrow.” According to reports, no agreement has yet been reached on residuals, minimum staffing or Artificial Intelligence: in other words, all of the critical issues.

The WGA statement evades all the burning questions. What is going on in the closed-door talks? What are the WGA and SAG-AFTRA giving up to their “partners,” as the union leaders persist in terming the giant firms? Who can believe that Iger, Zaslav and company have intervened in person to accept the “transformative” and “historic” gains that writers require?

Writers and actors should demand to know the contents of these meetings. Months of struggle and sacrifice can be thrown away by union officials in the name of reaching a “reasonable” and “rational” agreement with the companies. This is what happened in 2008, when WGA officials claimed a “historic” settlement had been reached. In reality, the capitulation on streaming at that time opened the door for the ongoing, sharp decline in writers’ incomes.

The anti-democratic character of this process expresses the more fundamental realities. The pro-capitalist unions, despite their rhetoric, are striving to impose unpopular and retrogressive agreements, serving the interests of the corporations, on their members. This cannot be done democratically. Secret talks, rammed-through agreements and rigged elections and ratification votes are the inevitable techniques of organizations at odds with the interests and needs of their members.

Barron's referred Friday to analysts who suggested that the “unusual step” of the CEOs participating directly “could indicate that a deal is close—or simply a renewed sense of urgency to end a walkout that is preventing work from resuming on a wide array of film and TV projects, leaving studios and networks with vast looming gaps in their release schedules.”

No doubt the companies are under pressure and anxious to restart production. But it would be a serious error to draw the complacent conclusion that therefore the WGA negotiators have the companies “where they want them.” These are multi-billion-dollar firms, operating with the full support of Wall Street, the Biden administration and the rest of the American elite.

In this conflict, the AMPTP is not simply representing the entertainment giants, it is acting on behalf of the entire ruling elite, which intends to make an example of the writers and actors. Any letup, as far as the latter is concerned, in the corporate offensive would only encourage autoworkers, healthcare workers and millions of others. This would threaten every aspect of ruling class policy, including its relentless war drive against Russia and China. The unions, staffed by affluent, upper middle class operators, thoroughly tied to the establishment, are responding to that class agenda, not the anger of their members.

Both the writers and actors, as they have explained themselves on numerous occasions and in various forums, face “existential” threats to their jobs and livelihoods. The WGA itself acknowledges that “Writers are facing the most comprehensive assault on compensation and working conditions that they have seen in a generation.” Writers’ incomes have fallen by 23 percent, taking inflation into account, over the past decade.

The studios, networks and streaming service are determined to transform much of the industry’s labor force into gig workers, hired and disposed of at the companies’ convenience. The companies intend to use the extraordinary technologies that have been developed, including Artificial Intelligence, and other means to slash jobs and drastically lower costs.

The two sides are on a collision course, and there is no compromise possible that would advance the writers’ and actors’ interests.

Only the full-scale mobilization of the working class in the entertainment industry, shutting down every

production and *consciously* directed against the corporate stranglehold over film and television production will yield results for the writers and actors. This requires a break with—in fact, a revolt against—the current officialdom in the WGA, SAG-AFTRA, Teamsters, IATSE and the rest of the unions. They are organically incapable of leading and deeply hostile to such a course, which would disrupt their myriad relationships with management and the Democratic Party.

The seriousness of the situation demands serious action. Leaving the fate of the courageous, determined strike in the hands of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA leaders is a recipe for defeat and the further, even more drastic devastation of writers’ and actors’ conditions. It is also a recipe for the continuing decline and degeneration of cultural life in the US. If film and television production is left at the mercy of the Igers, Zaslavs and the rest of the corporate thugs, writers and actors will be forced to work on nothing but trash.

We urge strikers to begin taking the initiative themselves, organizing democratically controlled rank-and-file committees that will demand the right to oversee the talks and fight for *serious* wage and residual increases, guaranteed staffing that will sustain and expand the present professions and ensure the fate of new generations, a ban on AI that affects writers’ and actors’ jobs and incomes and the opening of the companies’ books in order to document the thievery that has taken place and put a stop to it in the future.



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