# Writers Guild announces agreement with studios, networks: No such deal will stop the attacks on writers' incomes and conditions

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On Sunday, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) announced they had reached a tentative agreement. The three-year deal has to be ratified by the WGA's various leadership bodies before going to the membership for a vote. The writers' strike began May 2. Some 65,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) have been on strike since mid-July.

The WGA immediately began to demobilize the strikers Sunday, suspending picketing even while the union admitted that the "final contract language" had not even been drafted and continuing to keep all the proposed settlement of the deal under wraps.

In a statement, the WGA asked the 11,000 writers to be "patient" and told them that what the union negotiators had won in the new deal "is due to the willingness of this membership to exercise its power, to demonstrate its solidarity, to walk side-by-side, to endure the pain and uncertainty of the past 146 days... We can say, with great pride, that this deal is exceptional—with meaningful gains and protections for writers in every sector of the membership."

The determination and solidarity of the writers and actors are undeniable, and inspiring. But that does not lead to the conclusion that the agreement is "exceptional," with "meaningful gains and protections for writers."

On the contrary, every aspect of the present situation, including the conduct of the strike by the WGA leadership, points to one overwhelming reality: that the proposed agreement, despite whatever cosmetic changes were made by the companies, will do nothing to stop the precipitous deterioration in writers' incomes and conditions and that it needs to be rejected by the rank and file.

More than half a trillion dollars was wiped off the market value of the largest entertainment groups in 2022. Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery, Paramount and NBCUniversal collectively lost more than $10 billion in operating income last year because of their push into streaming. These corporations, driven on by Wall Street, fully intend to press ahead with slashing jobs and costs.

Insofar as the new deal impacts their plans and operations in the most minimal fashion, the giant companies, their lawyers and accountants began weeks ago working out means of using loopholes, working around the contract where necessary and simply ignoring it when it inconveniences them.

In August, in the midst of the strike, Reuters reported that Disney had "created a task force to study artificial intelligence [AI] and how it can be applied across the entertainment conglomerate, even as Hollywood writers and actors battle to limit the industry's exploitation of the technology." The source at Disney who provided Reuters with the information "sees AI as one tool to help control the soaring costs of movie and television production." Reuters added that as evidence of its interest, "Disney has 11 current job openings seeking candidates with expertise in artificial intelligence or machine learning."

Anyone who believes that behind-closed-door talks between the WGA and the ruthless cutthroats of the AMPTP could result in gains that will answer the problems and interests of the film and television writers needs to seriously think through the conditions under which the agreement was reached, as well as how it was received.

In one of the more candid media comments, the *Hollywood Reporter* wondered out loud about the fact that while writers were "advocating for greater compensation in the streaming era through higher wage floors, regulation of mini-rooms and residuals tied to the performance of their shows," the conglomerates, "who have been feeling pressure to cut costs ever since Wall Street turned on unprofitable streaming operations in 2022 and amid an uncertain economic climate in general," were "seeking to rein in spending on labor." The publication added, "It remains to be seen how both sides managed to reach a compromise that will satisfy their constituents."

The WGA-AMPTP announcement was met with enthusiasm by Wall Street, the entertainment industry press, various union officials, Democratic Party politicians and the pseudo-left *Jacobin* magazine.

Leading the chorus, President Joe Biden issued a statement in which he "applauded" the writers' union and the studios, networks and streaming services for reaching a tentative agreement "that will allow writers to return to the important work of telling the stories of our nation, our world—and of all of us. This agreement, including assurances related to artificial intelligence, did not come easily. But its formation is a testament to the power of collective bargaining."

Taking Biden's comment at face value, it indicates he has been informed about the content of the proposed strike-ending

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agreement, the details of which have been entirely withheld from the WGA membership. This demonstrates the high-level attention the writers' (and actors') strike has received from the US government and the American establishment as a whole. If the Biden administration has stayed out of the process directly, it was because the White House preferred to rely on the AFL-CIO, WGA and SAG-AFTRA to carry out the sabotage of the struggle, by isolating the strike, providing it with no viable strategy and leaving the writers and actors vulnerable to immense economic pressure.

The president is visiting Michigan Tuesday, in his words, to "join the [autoworkers'] picket line and stand in solidarity with the men and women of [the] UAW," in other words, to try and wrap up the autoworkers' strike as well, on behalf of the car companies.

In his statement on the WGA, Biden went out of his way to "urge all employers to remember that all workers—including writers, actors, and autoworkers—deserve a fair share of the value their labor helped create."

In response to a similar comment by the president in regard to the autoworkers' struggle, Will Lehman, Mack Trucks worker and candidate for UAW president in 2022, pointed out that what Biden "is trying to cover up is that workers and the corporate oligarchy have fundamentally irreconcilable class interests. There is no 'fair share' in a set-up in which investors get billions, executives get millions, and workers get pennies."

This holds true for the entertainment industry in spades. Writers have lost 23 percent of their income over the past decade. In any given year, according to *Variety* in May, an estimated 50 percent of SAG-AFTRA's members "won't earn a penny for acting; only 5-15% of members earn enough to qualify for the health care threshold of $26,470." *Variety* further calculated that only 2 percent of the union's membership "safely earn a middle class wage."

The writers and actors confront corporations like Amazon and Disney, with annual revenue in 2022 of $514 billion and $83 billion, respectively, and executives like Warner Bros. Discovery's David Zaslav, who was paid almost $500 million over the period 2018-2022, and Disney's Bob Iger, who took in $209,780,532 over the same period.

In addition to Biden, Democrats Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and California Gov. Gavin Newsom rapidly sent out statements in support after the tentative agreement was announced.

Shoring up the Democrats, in its comment on the agreement, *Jacobin* magazine began by noting, "We do not yet know what is in the tentative agreement." Continuing in the same vein and relying on the soothing report in the *New York Times*, a leading voice of the American ruling elite, that the "Writers Guild of America got most of what it wanted," the publication observed that the "bargaining committee says the deal is 'exceptional.' For now, anything beyond that is speculation."

It is not a matter of speculation. The character and role of the American trade unions are not an "open question." For decades, the unions, including the WGA and SAG-AFTRA, have betrayed and strangled *every* effort by workers to defend their conditions or improve them. They have become arms of management, enforcing concessions and job losses. The writers are in their present predicament because of the sell-out of the 2007-2008 strike and subsequent deals. The WGA leadership, by its social character and role as a "partner" of the giant firms, can only betray.

In response to Sunday's news, the markets and the financial world generally also put their hands together. Shares of both Disney and Netflix were up about 1 percent in Monday's premarket. Warner Bros. Discovery Inc. jumped 3.6 percent. Shares of movie theater companies also rose. AMC Theatres' CEO Adam Aron described the deal as a cause for joy. "An announced deal ends the 5-month long Writers' strike, pending an affirmative union member vote," he tweeted Sunday. "Directors and Writers contracts now behind us. Only the Screen Actors Guild left to go. The world's movie theatres can celebrate."

Zaslav, Iger, Ted Sarandos of Netflix and Donna Langley of NBCUniversal personally intervened in the final week of negotiation. Gov. Newsom told the media he was following the secret talks on a daily basis. Wealthy showrunners, such as Ryan Murphy, and reactionary celebrities of the Bill Maher type, were demanding the strike be wound up. How could anything "exceptional" in the positive sense of the word have emerged from this sordid process?

The AMPTP, backed by the media, is pushing for a return to work as quickly as possible. As noted, the WGA has stopped its picketing. Why? The strike is not over and the deal has not been ratified by the rank and file. The studios, according to *Deadline*, requested that once an agreement was ratified that the writers "pick up their pens and hit their keyboards again very soon afterwards," i.e., before SAG-AFTRA also had a new agreement. "It seems a pathway to split the difference was found." Whatever that means, it sounds very much like stabbing the actors in the back.

The effort to wrap up the writers' strike in the present manner underscores basic points the WSWS has been making over the course of the conflict. The WGA leadership, affluent and well-connected, thoroughly tied to the Hollywood establishment and Democratic Party, is incapable of leading a successful fight for jobs, wages and decent working *and* cultural conditions. Such a struggle requires a diametrically opposed perspective, one that begins from the realities of class warfare and the need to break the stranglehold of the conglomerates over film and television production through the socialist reorganization of society. Democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, as part of the international struggle of the working class, need to be built to carry forward this program.

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