

Writers Guild orders writers to return to work before tentative agreement ratified by membership

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On Tuesday, in a deeply undemocratic action, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) ordered striking film and television writers to return to work the following day, before the rank-and-file has had time to study the details of the deal, much less vote on the allegedly “exceptional” 94-page memorandum of agreement. The union released the terms of the new Basic Agreement between the writers and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which represents the major film, television and streaming services, the same day it sent writers back to work.

According to the union, writers will be able to vote on the contract October 2-9.

The return-to-work order by the WGA is a violation of the rights of the membership to vote on the tentative agreement before ending strike action and an act of sabotage in regard to striking actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA).

It is further proof that the WGA officialdom, like the rest of the trade union bureaucracies, exists not to advance writers class interests, but police the workforce on behalf of the corporations.

In a message to the WSWS, a striking SAG-AFTRA member commented, “I wish writers had gotten the chance to read through everything and digest the TA before being told what a great accomplishment it was, and I truly hate that the strike has already been called off.”

Writers were on strike for 148 days following the expiration of their previous three-year contract on May 1. Throughout the summer, thousands of writers, actors and their supporters, braved scorching temperatures to picket studios, ongoing productions and the headquarters of major corporations, such as Netflix, Disney and Amazon, in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago. What have they been making these sacrifices for? So union officials could trade away their futures behind closed doors.

While the studios had sought to isolate striking writers by coming to terms with the other entertainment unions, such as the Directors Guild of America, following a mini-rebellion by actors in the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, (SAG-AFTRA), thousands of actors joined the writers on

strike on July 14 for the first “dual strike” against the studios since 1960.

There is no question that the WGA’s efforts to get workers back on the job quickly are aimed at forcing through not only the writers’ agreement, which covers some 11,000 writers in the WGA from September 25, 2023 through May 1, 2026, but also at putting pressure on SAG-AFTRA to agree to a deal quickly in the coming days. The SAG-AFTRA leadership has shown every inclination to do precisely that.

The hurried return to work order by the WGA comes less than 24 hours after a SAG-AFTRA announcement that over 30,000 members of the union covered under the Interactive Media Agreement, which covers video games, authorized strike action by 98 percent. The union has not called a strike in this industry.

WGA West chief negotiator Ellen Stutzman, in an effort to justify the union’s return-to-work order, told *Deadline* in a Tuesday interview: “The leadership knows they made a good deal, so members should go back to work. People should go back to work and start getting a paycheck while the ratification process goes on. They’ve been out of work for far too long.”

The arrogance of the union leaders, who “know best,” is repugnant. Stutzman made \$290,000 in 2022, while many WGA members struggle to keep their heads above water.

Comedian and WGA negotiating committee member Adam Conover told his 277,000 followers on Twitter/X on September 26, “See you all at work tomorrow.” In an interview in the *Washington Post* that was published the same day, Conover said it was “overwhelmingly good” this contract is.

A seven-page summary highlighting the differences between the union’s initial demands on key issues and what it achieved in the tentative agreement explodes claims that the new contract is an “overwhelmingly” good deal for writers.

In some of the most expensive cities in the world, writers’ basic wages will only increase by 5 percent in the first year, followed by 4 percent in the second year, and 3.5 in year three, for a total of 12.5 percent increase over the three years. The WGA had only

been asking for a 16 percent wage increase over the life of the contract. The union acknowledges that incomes for writers have fallen 23 percent over the past decade. The increases in the new contract will neither make up for that decline nor protect writers against inflation over the next three years. They will be in a worse situation in 2026 than they are now.

Rents in Manhattan, for example, have increased 30 percent since February 2020 and in Brooklyn by 20 percent. Median home prices in Los Angeles County rose 11.2 percent from August 2022 to August 2023. Food and gas prices continue to climb.

The miserable wage increase is essentially the acceptance by the WGA of the unofficial ceiling that the Biden administration and corporations, assisted by the unions, have imposed on workers in contract after contract.

Reports in the mainstream press have hailed a new “viewership-based streaming bonus” model the union negotiated. Since the advent of internet-based streaming services, writers have seen their residual paychecks evaporate as more shows move to streaming off of cable.

The “bonus” negotiated by the union will be extremely hard to achieve for most writers. In order to qualify for the bonus, which can be as little as \$9,031 and tops out at \$40,500, a show must be viewed by 20 percent of subscribers to that particular streaming service within the first 90 days of release. In the case of Netflix, which boasts nearly 240 million worldwide subscribers, that means some 48 million subscribers need to watch that show within 3 months.

Furthermore, the current agreement notes that the bonus structure will only take effect for projects “released on or after January 1, 2024.” In other words, none of the current shows or films airing on the streaming services are eligible for the bonus, *and* any shows released before the end of the year are likewise ineligible.

Making a mockery of “data transparency,” the WGA revealed that the companies will still control the books as far as viewership numbers are concerned. Under the agreement the company will provide select members of the Guild leadership, after they have agreed to a confidentiality agreement, the “total number of hours streamed, both domestically and internationally, of self-produced high budget streaming programs.” Because of the “particularly sensitive nature of the Confidential Viewership Information” the WGA agreed to grant “access” to this information to only “a limited number of individuals...not to exceed six (6) in number.”

This rotten clause alone, which accommodates itself to capitalist “business secrets,” is cause for the contract to be rejected. In reality, the conglomerates keep no “secrets” from each other, it is only the writers and workers in the industry from whom they hide their operations based on exploitation, swindling and fraud.

In dozens of articles featuring interviews with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, writers and actors detailed not only the attacks on their living standards by profit-hungry corporations, but the dangers posed by Artificial Intelligence (AI).

In the current agreement, the corporations cannot force writers to use AI software, such as ChatGPT. However, as the *Wall Street Journal* noted, the deal allows the corporations to train AI models on writers’ work. “Entertainment executives,” WSJ wrote, “didn’t want to relinquish the right to train their own AI tools based on TV and movie scripts, since their understanding is that AI tech platforms already are training their own models on such materials.” All the companies have begun investigating how to use AI to reduce costs and slash jobs. The new agreement will do nothing to stop the process.

As one Twitter/X user put it, the WGA carved out a loophole “so big you can drive a semi through it on AI autopilot. ‘A writer cannot be forced to use AI *but* can choose to,’ and that...the breach of the hull...direct hit.” We safely predict: the companies will run circles around the WGA and victimized writers on this issue.

The deal represents major cost savings for the corporations. According to the WGA’s own figures, the yearly estimated value of the deal agreed upon is *little more than half* of the entirely inadequate amount the union proposed May 1. The WGA claims they were asking for a contract that would cost the studios \$429 million a year, yet agreed to one that will cost only \$233 million a year, or about \$13 million less than Warner Bros. Discovery CEO David Zaslav “earned” in 2021, and about \$75 million less than the \$308 million Endeavor’s Ari Emanuel was paid in 2021.

This agreement is a travesty and a betrayal. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party call on striking writers to reject the tentative agreement and form lines of communication with like-minded workers in order to expand the struggle.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:
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