

Writers' strike shut down as WGA attempts to ram through sell-out contract

David Walsh**28 September 2023**

On Tuesday, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) leadership called off the nearly five-month strike by 11,000 film and television writers on the basis of a sell-out agreement. With contempt for the democratic rights of the writers, the strike was ended before a vote on the agreement and with tens of thousands of actors still on strike. The rank and file will have the "right" to affirm the union's self-proclaimed "exceptional" deal starting next week.

Writers should reject the agreement and fight to mobilize the entire working class against the ruling class offensive against jobs and living standards.

The anti-democratic, back-stabbing character of the return to work is revealing. The heads of some of the largest conglomerates intervened personally in the negotiation process in recent weeks. President Joe Biden and California Governor Gavin Newsom, both Democrats, also made their presence felt. The message from all these powerful establishment forces was clear: it was time to wrap this up. The WGA leadership obediently fell into line.

The WGA apparatus has functioned as the agent of the corporations and the government in this strike in precisely the same fashion as the UAW, Teamsters and every other section of the union officialdom in their respective industries.

At present, WGA officials, the rest of the AFL-CIO leadership, the White House and various Democrats, the media and the pseudo-left are unanimous in declaring the tentative agreement reached Sunday a breakthrough of historic character.

This is a fraud. Writers have seen a 23 percent decline in real wages over the past decade, but the agreement includes wage "increases" that, in fact, fall below inflation, meaning a further decline.

The settlement, according to the WGA, will only cost the multi-billion-dollar companies \$233 million a year, down from the union's already completely inadequate demand for a package worth \$429 million.

The cost for the companies is little more than the amount Bob Iger of Disney earned from 2018 to 2022 (\$210 million), and, remarkably, \$13 million *less* than Warner Bros. Discovery CEO David Zaslav raked in two years ago.

When the conglomerates get down to business, the tentative agreement will be seen for what it is: a deal that does nothing to

stop their ruthless drive to organize an industry based on "gig" work. Contrary to the occasional union demagogue, the companies' policies are not determined only, or even primarily, by personal "greed," as rapacious as the various executives may individually be, but by the objective social and economic laws and imperatives of the capitalist system. On artificial intelligence, staffing and residuals, the companies will find ways around any minor obstacles placed in their path.

The giant firms are obliged to. Having had half a trillion dollars wiped off their market value in 2022, the entertainment groups, with Wall Street holding the whip hand, fully intend to press ahead with lowering costs and destroying jobs.

In one of the more dispassionate assessments, the *Radio and Television Business Report* noted bluntly in a headline this week, "Financial impact of WGA settlement no big deal." The website noted that Moody's Investors Services did not "expect the settlement to have a noticeable impact on the financial health of the affected media companies."

Forbes pointed out that "it's possible many of those who went on strike... may come back to find their jobs are still in danger, or just plain gone." Along the same lines, CNN observed that "the sobering truth is there might be fewer opportunities to go around, as the days of 'peak TV' appear destined to give way to belt tightening and greater selectivity."

The writers' and actors' "dual strike" emerged as part of, and, in turn, deepened a volatile social and political situation in the US and globally. Outraged by decades of relentless attacks and deteriorating conditions, hundreds of thousands of UPS, auto, healthcare and other sections of workers entered into struggle this year to regain some portion of what they have lost.

The *Wall Street Journal* notes anxiously that the US "lost more than seven million workdays because of labor disputes this year through August, more than any full year since 2000—and the figures don't include the United Auto Workers strike that started earlier this month." The *Journal* adds that "more walkouts could be coming," making reference to 53,000 housekeepers, bartenders and other workers in Las Vegas; 75,000 workers at healthcare giant Kaiser Permanente; and 26,000 flight attendants at American Airlines.

The strike figures are themselves only a very partial and pale reflection of the anger boiling up in the working class.

The union bureaucracies do everything in their power to smother workers' actions in the interests of enforcing concessions, increasing exploitation and subordinating life in the US to the imperialist war policy. They systematically hamstring, demoralize and sabotage every effort at concerted action by the working class.

The writers looked forward to the actors in the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) joining them on the picket lines. Only a mini-revolt by thousands of actors prevented SAG-AFTRA officials from reaching a rotten deal.

The writers and actors then eagerly anticipated a strike by hundreds of thousands of UPS workers. The Teamsters crushed that strike movement. Now the wrapping up of the writers' and actors' strike is intended to discourage and isolate the autoworkers, the vast majority of whom remain working during the phony "stand-up" strike of the UAW apparatus.

The writers and actors have fought very hard and showed great determination and resilience, but like UPS and auto workers, in the end they have come up against a union leadership tied to capitalism and its profit drive, which views the predatory corporations as valued "partners."

They are propped up by a series of phony "lefts," one of whose principal activities at present is to act as defense attorney for the union bureaucracies, in whose ranks, in any case, they swim as comfortably as fish in the sea. *Jacobin* magazine, for example, declared that the WGA bargaining committee "says the deal is 'exceptional,'" and that's good enough for *Jacobin*, for whom anything beyond the union officials' boasting about their own accomplishments is "speculation." The misnamed *Against the Current*, a minor "left" cheerleader of the union bureaucracies, has already declared a "Screenwriters' victory" and a "big win."

For their part, Biden and the Democrats have given the tentative agreement their official stamp of approval. The "most pro-labor president in history," called the WGA settlement "a testament to the power of collective bargaining" and urged other employers "to remember that all workers – including writers, actors, and autoworkers – deserve a fair share of the value their labor helped create." Cynicism competes with hypocrisy in these words of an individual who banned the rail workers' strike last year and is relentlessly driving the planet to the verge of world war.

As with every strike and struggle that workers have engaged in, the writers' strike has demonstrated the necessity for breaking out of the restraints of the trade union apparatus, through the building of a network of rank-and-file committees, controlled by the workers. Only on this basis can workers take control of their struggles and unify them in a common offensive against the ruling class.

At the same time, the fight of writers and actors, again as with every section of the working class, must be directed at the structure of present-day society and a culture increasingly

dominated by warmongers, criminals, fascists and oligarchs.

The content of films and, later in the twentieth century, television has always been an explosive issue in the US. The production and popularity of films in the post-World War II period that criticized or challenged, even in a limited manner, the American economic system proved intolerable for the ruling class, which carried out a vicious political witch-hunt to stamp out and illegalize left-wing thought.

A new period of mass upheaval, in response to social inequality, war and the danger of dictatorship, entails the danger for the powers that be of a revival of radicalized and radicalizing film and television production. The WGA and the other entertainment unions treat the corporate chokehold on cultural life as inviolable and eternal. They have never raised a word against it during the current strike. This is a critical element of their treachery and service to the status quo.

Strong social and economic forces are working on a world scale in the opposite direction, encouraging a broader and more comprehensive, critical-revolutionary approach to life.

The "pen" of the serious writer-artist never serves "as a toy" for his or her "personal diversion or that of the ruling classes," Leon Trotsky once insisted. Inevitably, an element of protest, which often involves depicting "the sufferings, hopes, and struggles of the working classes," enters into every serious work.

Only the reorganization of society, on the basis of equality and solidarity, will provide the conditions for genuine artistic freedom and creativity. The first condition for freedom and creativity in film and television production is that it not remain a business activity. Discussions on the picket lines have revealed a definite, if still unformed, turn to the left. Objective realities will lead film workers on to the path of conscious struggle against the entire existing social order.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact