

# Writers Guild of America West staff strike exposes exploitation and inequality within the union apparatus

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On February 17, staff members at the Writers Guild of America West (WGAW) walked off the job, launching an unfair labor practices strike against the organization that presents itself as a defender of writers against corporate exploitation. Picket lines went up outside the guild's Fairfax Avenue headquarters in Los Angeles in a politically charged confrontation: a union functioning as an employer, accused by its own employees of retaliation, surveillance and bad-faith bargaining.

The walkout, involving about 115 administrative and professional staff, coincides with a sharp intensification of class struggle. More than 31,000 nurses and healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente are striking, while tens of thousands of educators in the Los Angeles Unified School District and the University of California system are preparing walkouts. Workers across various sectors are pushing back against intensifying exploitation, austerity, war, repression and the fascist policies of the Trump administration.

WGAW staff workers are responsible for core guild operations, including administering residuals, enforcing contracts, conducting research and coordinating communications.

In spring 2025, staff formed the Writers Guild Staff Union (WGSU) to win collective bargaining rights and workplace protections. The guild leadership granted voluntary recognition, but negotiations for a first contract soon revealed sharp divisions last September. Over nineteen bargaining sessions, WGSU co-chairs Dylan Holmes and Missy Brown accused management of surface-level bargaining, saying proposals failed to address their core demands.

Central to the dispute is “just cause” protection. Workers cited alleged retaliatory firings during the organizing drive and demanded strong due-process safeguards, while the union leadership proposed performance-based exceptions that staff argued would preserve unilateral authority.

In January 2026, 82 percent of members authorized an unfair labor practices strike, filing charges with the National Labor Relations Board alleging surveillance, retaliation and bad-faith bargaining. The guild management has rejected the accusations, maintaining that discipline was performance-related and its proposals comprehensive.

The WGSU affiliated with the Pacific Northwest Staff Union (PNWSU), founded in 1979 as union employees sought to defend their own working conditions within increasingly corporatized labor institutions. The affiliation was intended to avoid conflicts of interest that might arise if the guild staff were represented by unions inside the same federation.

PNWSU's existence reflects a broader trajectory. Emerging during the economic crises of the late 1970s, it expressed efforts by union staff to resist deteriorating conditions inside growing bureaucratic organizations. Yet such initiatives have done little or nothing to halt the unions' wholesale accommodation to management and the state.

The staff unionization drive rested on a simple premise: collective bargaining should apply inside unions as well. While apparently reasonable, this approach largely aimed to stabilize existing structures rather than challenge their evolution into corporatized apparatuses. As unions expanded with sizable assets and professional leadership layers, staff unions often managed internal tensions without confronting bureaucratic consolidation.

WGAW staff stressed their campaign upheld the guild's stated principles, citing wage stagnation, heavy workloads, job insecurity and concerns over technological monitoring.

Wages are quite low. The minimum annual salary for staffers is \$43,000, an amount that is utterly inadequate in Los Angeles's high-cost environment. WGSU's proposal to start at \$59,737 with a 7.5 percent increase upon ratification and 5 percent increases in each of the next two years, does not significantly change matters. (According to financial

technology firm SmartAsset, a single adult needs an annual income of approximately \$115,690 to live comfortably in Los Angeles.)

Burnout following the 2023 writers' strike has played a major role. Staff members reported prolonged hours and intense demands during that conflict, followed by limited advancement and persistent turnover as more experienced employees left for better-paid positions elsewhere in the industry. Reflecting broader anxieties across entertainment workplaces, staff also sought safeguards against the use of artificial intelligence in surveillance and performance evaluation.

The dispute has highlighted stark inequality within the guild's staff structure. While most employees earn modest pay amid rising living costs, senior administrators receive executive-level salaries. WGAW Executive Director Ellen Stutzman earns approximately \$682,692 annually, with other top officials making between \$399,000 and \$468,000.

These disparities point to a "bureaucracy within the bureaucracy." A layer of upper-level staff, formally within the staff union, often views union administration as a career trajectory leading to six-figure positions.

The resulting structure increasingly resembles a corporate hierarchy. Advancement within the apparatus becomes a central objective, fostering competing bureaucratic interests and widening the gap between leadership, administrators and the rank-and-file writers the guild claims to represent.

This dynamic is hardly unique to the WGAW. The United Auto Workers (UAW), for example, maintains financial reserves exceeding \$1 billion and has been shaken by corruption scandals and rank-and-file rebellion following mass layoffs. The WGAW dispute thus appears less as an anomaly than as a concentrated expression of broader trends toward union corporatization.

Guild officials sought to reassure members that operations would continue and that preparations for upcoming studio negotiations remained on track. Striking staff disagree, stressing that their roles in communications, organizing and training are indispensable. They pointed to their contributions during the 2023 writers' strike, arguing that minimizing their importance echoed studio rhetoric historically used to diminish creative labor.

The strike has already produced tangible disruptions. Member meetings intended to gather priorities for 2026 bargaining were canceled, headquarters temporarily closed and screenings at the Writers Guild Theater suspended.

The guild's Minimum Basic Agreement with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers expires May 31, 2026, with negotiations scheduled to begin March 16, barely a month after the staff walkout began.

No doubt, studios will try to exploit these tensions and

weaken workers' leverage in the upcoming WGA negotiations. Writers should remember how the union leadership transformed a potentially powerful working-class struggle into a sellout in 2023.

The staff strike has elicited mixed reactions across the entertainment labor landscape. Organizations such as SAG-AFTRA, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters have expressed cautious, if not ambiguous solidarity, while the staff union of the Writers Guild of America East publicly supported the walkout and called for good-faith bargaining.

Among rank-and-file writers, responses have been more pointed. Some have highlighted the apparent hypocrisy of a union accused of denying its own staff protections it demanded from studios. Individuals and political organizations seeking careers within the union bureaucracies, including the Los Angeles chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America, have remained largely silent.

Rank-and-file writers have demonstrated concrete support for the strikers. A hardship fund for striking staff raised over \$25,000 within three days, much of it from guild members. This reaction suggests significant sympathy at the rank-and-file level and hints at the potential for broader solidarity independent of the official channels.

The strike's political significance is already evident. The conflict has exposed the role of the union apparatus and highlighted the futility of relying on entrenched bureaucratic apparatuses to advance workers' interests.

Support for the walkout among rank-and-file writers points toward the need for alternative forms of organization grounded in direct rank-and-file control. Similar perspectives have been articulated by Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, whose campaign for leadership of the UAW emphasized transferring power from union bureaucracies to workers themselves through rank-and-file committees.

Ultimately, the WGAW staff strike crystallizes a broader contradiction confronting workers internationally. As unions largely function as administrative institutions integrated into corporate and state frameworks, conflicts between rank-and-file workers and bureaucratic leadership will only intensify and workers must take direct control of the struggles away from the bureaucracy uniting across sectors and borders.



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