

Entertainment industry turmoil intensifies as WGA staff walkout continues

Marc Wells
5 March 2026

The strike by 115 staff members at the Writers Guild of America West (WGAW) is almost three weeks' old, with no indication of an immediate conclusion. What may have seemed at first like a minor and perhaps brief dispute, has become quite bitter.

The strike helps expose basic truths about one of the most prominent unions in the entertainment industry and US trade unionism as a whole.

As the Writer Guild's own employees walk picket lines outside its Los Angeles headquarters, the organization's leadership has responded with maneuvers that reveal the chasm that exists between a well-paid bureaucracy and the rank and file.

At the center of the dispute are not simply wages and working conditions for staff, but a broader political and social question—the role of the union apparatus in a period of deepening capitalist crisis and social upheaval.

One of the most revealing episodes in the strike has been the cancellation of the Writers Guild annual awards program which was set for March 8.

Officially, the event was scrapped in the name of avoiding a “picket line dilemma.” Guild leaders claimed they did not wish to force members to choose between crossing a picket line or missing a major professional event.

The so-called “Picket Line Dilemma” arises because WGAW is functioning simultaneously as a union and as an employer. Its staff, members of the Pacific Northwest Staff Union, is demanding fair wages and protections in the face of rising living costs and glaring pay disparities. The guild's executives, some earning more than \$700,000 per year, are negotiating against their own employees.

By canceling the awards ceremony, WGAW's leadership sought to sidestep a deeper political

problem. The vast majority of writers identify instinctively not with the six-figure executives inside the building, but with the workers outside holding signs. To proceed with a gala celebration while staff members are on strike would have all too starkly revealed the social chasm within the organization.

The bureaucracy has accused critics of attempting to create a “wedge” between writers and their union. But the wedge exists *objectively*. It is rooted in material interests. Writers face shrinking residuals, shorter production seasons, job insecurity and the growing threat of artificial intelligence. Union executives, by contrast, draw salaries that place them firmly in the upper layers of the professional-managerial elite.

The salary figures speak volumes. In 2023, the year of the last strike, David Young, then Executive Director, received \$1,065,657. Current Executive Director Ellen Stutzman is paid \$761,624. Assistant Executive Directors Charles Slocum, Rebecca Kessinger and Lise Anderson earn between roughly \$459,000 and \$568,000. Chief Financial Officer Jean Ngo earns \$390,617 and General Counsel Sean Graham \$343,870. These sums are far removed from the precarious reality confronting most working writers.

The staff strikers have explicitly cited this pay gap as a central grievance. In doing so, it has touched a nerve that extends beyond the walls of WGAW headquarters.

The conflict unfolds amid mounting struggles across the US and internationally. Nurses, teachers, graduate students, logistics workers and others have been, or are about to be, engaged in strikes and job actions against wage erosion and deteriorating conditions. Thousands of students have walked out to protest authoritarian domestic policies and escalating military aggression abroad.

The administration of Donald Trump has intensified

ICE raids, attacked democratic rights and carried out criminal military actions against countries including Iran and Venezuela. These actions are bound up with the crisis of American capitalism and the drive to reassert global dominance through militarism.

Writers are not insulated from these processes. The entertainment industry is undergoing rapid restructuring. Streaming consolidation, cost-cutting and AI-driven content generation threaten to further undermine livelihoods. As the WGA's contract with the major studios expires in May, the rank and file is preparing for what will become a major confrontation.

Under these conditions, the spectacle of guild executives earning Wall Street-level salaries while pleading financial constraints to their own staff only sharpens discontent.

The contradictions are equally acute at the Writers Guild of America East (WGAE), where staff are represented by the United Steelworkers (USW). While USW officials have issued empty statements expressing solidarity with the striking WGA West staff, they have refused to cancel a planned awards ceremony at WGAE, citing a legal loophole tied to their existing contract with the guild. This allows them to claim compliance with labor law while avoiding any action that would disrupt the institution's operations.

In practice, the USW's stance signals to management that it will prevent the strike from spreading and ensure rank-and-file anger does not develop into independent mobilization beyond the bureaucracy's control. The "practice what you preach" hypocrisy is evident: leaders voice sympathy while guaranteeing no meaningful disruption occurs.

This pattern extends beyond entertainment. As the Trump administration escalated aggression against Iran, the USW negotiated a refinery contract with minimal gains and no real protections, justifying it as necessary to keep refineries running. In doing so, it aligned workers with corporate profit and the US war drive, underscoring the bureaucracy's integration into state and corporate power.

Several prominent writers have publicly backed the striking WGAW staff. The most widely reported remarks came from Seth Rogen at SAG-AFTRA's 2026 Actor Awards on March 1, where, accepting Best Male Actor in a Comedy for *The Studio*, he quipped: "You [SAG-AFTRA] were able to pay

your own employees enough to keep the awards show from being canceled—take notes, WGA."

Writer Jackie Penn stressed that staff were indispensable during the 2023 strike, calling their current demands "perfectly reasonable." Joe Russo, CK Kiechel and Phillip Walker issued similar statements of solidarity.

These interventions are significant. The criticism suggests genuine unease within the broader membership. But appeals to the conscience of union executives, or to better internal "governance," do not address the problems.

The strike by 115 staff members has shed light on the gulf between the rank and file and the WGAW bureaucracy. Writers confront a profit-driven industry in crisis, shaped by monopolization, technological upheaval and relentless cost-cutting.

The cancellation of a ceremony cannot conceal this reality. Nor can accusations of creating a "wedge" suppress the growing awareness among writers that their interests diverge sharply from those who administer their union.

The essential issue of the WGAW staff strike is the need for independent organization. Rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, are required to break the stranglehold of the bureaucracy.

Such committees must link the struggle of guild staff with that of writers, refinery workers, teachers and others confronting the same underlying crisis. They must reject subordination to corporate profitability, militarism and the dictates of either major political party.

The issues raised by the staff strike are inseparable from, and entirely consistent with, the betrayal of the 2023 strike. More broadly, inseparable from the broader fight against exploitation, war and inequality. Writers, like all workers, must draw the necessary conclusions. The bureaucracy will not lead a genuine struggle against the system from which it derives its privileges.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact