

A socialist perspective for the film and television writers strike

**By David Walsh
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With full-scale picketing set to resume January 7, film and television writers enter the third month of their strike confronting studios and networks as intransigent as ever. The employers will stop at nothing to inflict a defeat on the more than 10,000 writers, who are seeking to guarantee a decent future for themselves in a world of increasingly digitalized media.

There have been no contract discussions since December 7. Representatives of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) arrogantly walked out of the talks that day insisting that the Writers Guild (WGA) leadership drop key demands as a precondition for continued negotiations.

On January 2, to much media fanfare, late-night talk shows on NBC, ABC and CBS resumed normal production; only the David Letterman and Craig Ferguson shows on CBS will have writers preparing material, following an agreement reached between the guild and Letterman's Worldwide Pants production company. The Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien (both on NBC) and Jimmy Kimmel (ABC) shows were picketed by strikers.

O'Brien told his viewers, "We're back now but, sadly, we do not have our writers with us. I want to make this clear, I support their cause—these are very talented, very creative people who work extremely hard and I believe what they're asking for is fair."

Whatever the details of the agreement with Letterman, praised by the WGA leadership as "a positive step," it means relatively little in the grand scheme of things. To speculate about real or imaginary divisions among the studios and networks, or to count on the weakening of this or that major company, is only to avoid the critical questions and delude oneself.

Top executives at News Corp., Time Warner, GE, CBS, Viacom, Disney and the other multibillion-dollar media and entertainment conglomerates are a significant part of the American ruling elite. The latter has had its way in recent years, eliminating decent jobs and social programs, cutting wages and benefits for millions and, in the process, enriching itself fantastically from profits and the stock market. The corporate aristocracy has every intention of continuing to pursue this policy.

Studio and network executives are outraged by the writers' audacity in challenging their right to absolute control over the future of film, television and other media, including virtually all the wealth it produces. They intend to make an example of the writers for the benefit of every section of workers in Hollywood, New York and elsewhere. The contracts for actors

and directors expire next summer.

Writers should take seriously the December 17 "Open Letter to the Entertainment Industry" from the AMPTP when it asserts ominously that "writers are no closer today to getting their fair share of new media revenues than they were when the strike began." Indeed the studios and networks have no intention of ever conceding a 'fair share of new media revenues.' They are prepared to let the writers walk picket lines for many months until demoralization sets in.

From the outset, the conglomerates have made clear their willingness to sacrifice earnings in the short term in order to guarantee for themselves massive profits in the future at the expense of writers, actors and others in the profession. Ruthlessness is no doubt combined with anxiety about uncertain prospects, under conditions of a generalized slide into economic slump and a declining audience for standard film and television fare in particular.

The AMPTP's efforts to blame the economic hardships suffered by below the line workers and other consequences of the strike on the writers have had little impact on public opinion. A recent Variety poll, remarkably enough, found that a higher percentage of those surveyed in late December thought the strike was necessary than felt that way in mid-November. At the same time, however, fewer respondents were optimistic that the conflict would be resolved in the writers' favor.

The moguls are not engaged in a popularity contest. They represent global capital. While they engage in bitter competition between themselves, they are united in their determination to lower costs and break the writers. This unity of purpose was underlined by the extraordinary statement signed in December by the heads of the eight leading companies: Peter Chernin of News Corp., Robert Iger of Disney, Barry Meyer of Warner Bros., Leslie Moonves of CBS, Jeff Zucker of NBC Universal, Brad Grey of Paramount, Michael Lynton of Sony and Harry Sloan of MGM.

These individuals, whose activities are thoroughly parasitic, between them rake in hundreds of millions of dollars a year, far more than the union is asking as an annual increase in earnings for over 10,000 writers.

Rupert Murdoch of News Corp. embodies the ruthlessness and drive for personal wealth of this social layer. He sees in the writers' strike an economic and an ideological threat that has to be suppressed. In an interview in mid-December with his own Fox News, Murdoch complained that while the strike had first focused on the issue of the Internet, "it had moved on. And now the rhetoric is, you know, big, fat companies, and us poor writers, as though ... they really want to change to some

sort of socialist system and drag down the companies.”

This remark bears thinking about because of the big historical and social questions it raises.

The current writers’ strike, as Murdoch’s comment indicates, has opened up a new round in the Hollywood wars, stretching back to the early 1930s. While the best artists have always striven to represent reality in a truthful manner, the film studios and, later, television networks have had two concerns: the accumulation of profits and the ideological defense of the existing social order.

Writers and other film artists with integrity are impelled to report on life honestly. Such work is inevitably socially critical, sympathetic to the exploited, hostile to the rich and arrogant, outraged by injustice. It must always contain an element of protest. In the end, these sentiments and qualities are incompatible with the industry executives’ drive for profits and need to conceal the harshest social realities. The record of the struggle between these two imperatives, now out in the open, now concealed, is the history of Hollywood.

Writers may not have consciously sought to overthrow the existing set-up in the entertainment industry, but their insistence on decent conditions of work and control over the destiny of their own creative efforts has always been perceived by executives as dangerous. After all, at stake are enormously powerful media that reach mass audiences.

Since the early days of sound films writers have been perceived as a potential threat by their employers. The founding of the Screen Writers Guild (forerunner of the WGA) in 1933 was ferociously resisted by the film studios. Irving Thalberg of MGM referred to the SWG leaders as “a bunch of Reds.” Heads of production at the various studios mailed an editorial by William Randolph Hearst calling the guild “a device of communist radicals” to every screenwriter in their employ.

The ultimate establishment of the screenwriters’ union—after almost a decade of bitter battles—was only made possible, first, through the intervention of the Roosevelt administration concerned that the studios’ intransigence would radicalize the writers and others in Hollywood and, second, the approach of World War II and the need to “face the war (and its profit potential) as a united industry” (*The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-60*, Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund).

Ceplair and Englund write, “The blood-letting between studio management and the SWG, which endured for nine years, showed where the real conflict in Hollywood lay—not over money, but over the control of moviemaking. The producers willingly paid gargantuan salaries to the best actors, directors, and screenwriters, but steadfastly resisted any encroachment on creative decision-making.”

They go on: “The arrival in Hollywood [in the 1930s] of hundreds of artists fresh from these eastern [labor] wars, combined with the onset of the greatest depression the world had known, ensured that fundamental questions of organization would be raised.”

And fundamental questions of politics and social life. The ferocious resistance of the studios to the most modest demands impelled a considerable section of the screenwriters

to the left, toward the Communist Party (during World War II, some 25 to 30 percent of the most regularly employed writers were CP members). This by now Stalinized party, tragically, betrayed their best aspirations.

The studios’ assault on left-wing and socialist views experienced only a temporary let-up during the Second World War. Indeed on its eve, the House Un-American Activities Committee, then known as the Dies Committee (after Martin Dies, a Democratic congressman from Texas), and its California counterpart, the Tenney Committee (after state legislator Jack Tenney), made an effort to launch an anticommunist witch-hunt, rejected by the industry and powerful sections of the American ruling elite as a whole. This was not considered timely under conditions of a military alliance of the US with the Soviet Union.

With the onset of the Cold War in 1947, however, the American political establishment, including its liberal wing, in conjunction with the film studio executives undertook a sweeping purge of socialist and left elements in Hollywood. The crimes of Stalinism in the USSR and elsewhere, and the abject opportunism of the American Stalinist party, made the task that much easier.

The infamous and degrading blacklist (which had first been used in the 1930s against SWG militants) was instituted and hundreds of individuals were deprived of their livelihood solely on the basis of their political views. The leadership of the Screen Writers Guild, to their eternal shame, enthusiastically participated in the process.

Deep-going social criticism was virtually outlawed in the American film industry and, of course, on the television networks. This had the most damaging consequences for US film and television artists—political conformism and intellectual stultification became the order of the day and their consequences are still with us today.

The problems that writers face are economic, political and cultural. The studios and networks can neither guarantee decent living standards, pensions and benefits nor the minimal artistic freedom necessary to permit writers to carry out their work with a good conscience.

To resist the employers the writers’ strike needs, first of all, to be expanded to the entire industry. A serious action would mean shutting down film and television production. Actors, directors, crew, drivers and others need to recognize that if the writers are defeated, they will be next. Having delivered a blow to the writers, one of the biggest thorns in their side, the studios and networks will be emboldened to demand major concessions from everyone else. The downward economic and social spiral will be dramatically accelerated, to the advantage of the conglomerates, affecting every film artist, technician, below the line worker and related small business owner.

At the same time, writers will have to begin to understand that there is no trade union solution to the problem. Walking picket lines for months will not address the underlying issue, the corporate stranglehold over the entertainment industry. The problem the writers and the entire working population face is capitalism. Tackling that requires a new strategy, fighting for a broad-based political and cultural renewal along socialist lines.