

United States: Writers Strike for Economic Security in Response to Streaming

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Some 11,500 writers for the entertainment industry—TV broadcast and cable, movies and streaming—most based in Los Angeles and New York, decided May 1 to strike the industry over pay and job security, the first such strike in fifteen years. It may also be the first strike over artificial intelligence or AI which writers fear may displace them. The strike vote was remarkably strong, with 79% participating and 98% of them voting to strike.

This is a strike at the heart of a profitable trillion-dollar industry. Amazon has 200 million subscribers in the United States and abroad, Netflix 232 million. The Writers Guild of America (WGA) is negotiating with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), the umbrella organization that represent the film studios that the union is picketing, such as Disney, Warner Brothers, NBCUniversal, Paramount and Sony, as well as streaming companies like Amazon, Netflix, Apple.

To understand the strike, you have to know how the companies use the writers they hire. The writers create virtually everything we see on the screen. Each show has a showrunner, a producer-writer who has creative and administrative responsibility for the show. The showrunner has a group of writers who meet together to write the script. When the show is finished, these writers must search for work elsewhere. There is a minimum pay per episode that is the basis of writers' income, and the WGA wants it raised.

The union is striking because changes in the entertainment industry, especially the development of streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon, has led to fewer jobs and less income. The union's last contract was written for the TV broadcast, cable, and movie industry with different expectations than today. In the past, the typical TV show ran from September to May and had 22 to 25 episodes, but today streaming shows on Netflix or Amazon may only be eight or ten episodes. Because TV writers are paid by the episode, the change in format has reduced their pay and increased insecurity. While studio profits have risen 39% since the last contract, writers' wages have fallen 4%.

The WGA also wants to increase residuals, similar to royalties, so that writers also share in a show's success. The AMPTP claims that writers received a 46% increase in streaming residuals in their last contract, which began to kick in only last year. But rerun residuals that once brought writers a good part of their income no longer function because a rerun now often goes to a streaming service that doesn't share viewer data, so writers get far fewer residuals and smaller payments. So the WGA wants more money upfront.

The WGA also wants to protect writers' employment and give them opportunities to develop their craft by increasing the size of the writers' room to six people, four of whom must be writer-producers and others may be newer writers. The AMPTP has so far rejected that proposal. And looming over this strike is the fear that AI will write the scripts, an issue put on the table by the

WGA.

The strike will affect not only the 11,500 writers, but also thousands of other workers in the industry, and tens of millions of television viewers in the United States and around the world. The last WGA strike in 2007-2008, lasted 100 days while the longest strike in 1988, lasted 153. When writers struck in the past, the companies turned to reality TV shows, expanded talk shows and news, turned to reruns of old shows, as they will do again. And studios like Warner Brothers Discovery has been stockpiling scripts while Netflix will rely to a greater extent than its competitors on foreign-made films.

The writers are on the picket lines and a lot is at stake, not only for them, but also for the directors' union, DGA, and the actors' union, SAG, both scheduled to negotiate new contracts later this year. There is power in the pen—and the writers have laid theirs down.

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