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USA

Class Struggle Returns to U.S. as Strikes Spread from Actors to Auto Workers

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The last year has seen a remarkable number of strike threats, strikes, and strike settlements in diverse industries from coffee shops to railroads, from writers and actors to truck drivers and auto workers. At the moment, 25,000 auto workers and 150,000 actors are on strike.

We look here at the actors' strike, but before doing so we should remind ourselves of the gradually building momentum in the labor movement. Starbucks workers organized and struck, and as of today 354 stores with almost 9,000 workers have unionized, but none has won a contract. In April 2022 Amazon workers in New York City voted to unionize, but so far, they too have no contract. And they lost union representation elections at other Amazon facilities.

Railroad workers planned to strike in late 2022, but in December President Joe Biden and Congress used the Railway Labor Act to prevent a strike and impose a contract later accepted by the unions. The Teamsters union planned to strike UPS, but in July of this year they reached an agreement with many gains, though, because the leadership decided not to strike, they failed to improve the lot of many part-time workers.

Next came the writers and actors who shut down an industry that employs over two million workers of all sorts. The writers struck in May and the actors joined them on the picket lines in July, the first industry-wide shutdown in over 60 years. They were striking some of the most powerful corporations in America. The employers, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, represents the major motion picture studios such as Paramount, Sony, Universal, Disney and Warner Brothers, the principal television networks (including ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC), streaming services like Netflix, Apple TV+, and Amazon, as well as some cable companies.

Both unions were responding to changes in the industry with the rise of streaming services that grew phenomenally during COVID. They are also concerned with the rapid developments in artificial intelligence (AI) that threatened both writers and actors.

All of this led to greater determination. Some 11,000 film, television, news, radio and online writers won a major victory after a 148-day strike. With the industry desperate to get new shows online and in movie theaters, the workers won job guarantees and higher pay. They also won guarantees not to be replaced by ChatGPT. But some 150,000 television and movie actors, who walked out in May, are still on strike.

One big concern among the actors is being replaced by "digital doubles." The studio can ask an actor to go into the "orb," that is the photogrammetry booth where hundreds of cameras record his image as he makes different expressions and takes different poses. Once the photos are taken, as Scientific American explains, "visual effects (VFX) artists take the model from two-dimensional to three-dimensional." The 3-D image is then attached to a visual "skeleton" moved by an actor or by animation and placed in the appropriate background. Studios may not need any actors, though they may still want the pretty face.

The striking actors took some encouragement from the writers' settlement, but it's been a very long strike. Some writers have continued to march on the picket lines with them as have some striking hospital workers. And both actors and auto workers picketed in front of the HBO and Amazon offices in Manhattan. For both unions, it will be a hard fight. The class struggle is back, and while the results have been mixed so far, these workers' actions represent a sea change in American society.

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