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WGA Needs 21st-Century Wage System

Hooray for Hollywood! Well, maybe not right now. The UUJEC stands with the Writers' Guild of America (WGA), which has been on strike for a month—not only for money, but to reform a broken system, including calls to regulate AI. The entertainment industry is changing, and how writers get paid no longer matches the revenue model. Streaming has entered the picture—in fact has become the dominant means of distribution for services such as Netflix and Hulu, with subscriptions the main source of their income. The residuals on which writers have relied for decades are no longer significant; one writer gave an example of expected residuals from reairing a project decreased from thousands of dollars to a check for \$23.

In addition, instead of production companies investing in pilot programs—which, in the days of broadcast networks, meant the creation of a writer's room and at least a few episodes filmed and aired—now the streamers are creating "minirooms" of salaried writers to write single episodes that they then read and choose to produce or not.

Writers do just as much work to create these episodes, but without any guarantee of the level of compensation that was typical in the past. Meanwhile, streaming companies have been known to pull programs down when the initial period ends to avoid paying residuals—e.g., HBO pulled down its own coverage of the Emmy awards, depriving subscribers of continued access. Companies are also hiring all writers at a single rate, with no experience-based differential, so that a veteran writer is paid an entry-level rate, with no path for advancement, unlike almost any other career. This is not a matter of the streaming companies needing to cut costs for their own solvency; in fact, they are making great profits, particularly from subscriptions, which allow customers to watch any program at any time, without a specific re-airing on which to base residuals. (Of course, streaming platforms have records of how many times something has been viewed, even more accurate than old Nielsen ratings—it is not a question of technology, but of taking advantage of a situation beneficial to streaming companies at the expense of writers.)

Certainly changing industry practices will change compensation models to some degree; however, all parties must negotiate in good faith. The UUJEC calls on the Alliance of Motion Picture Television Producers to sit down with the WGA and work out a reasonable agreement that allows creative professionals to be compensated on an ongoing basis and subscribers to have ongoing access to their favorite programs. Unitarian Universalist principles include support for democracy in the whole society. Most corporations are paternalistic (at best), not democratic. With collective bargaining comes more democracy. Although in some companies and government agencies, workers or unions may have a nonvoting seat on the board, in general in the U.S.A., labor unions don't participate in high-level corporate decision-making. The UUJEC encourages the AMPTP to negotiate in good faith with the WGA and corporations in general to look toward European models of board inclusivity.