



Walkout NYC!: On Strike in a World of Fetishes, Fictions, and Beleaguered Workers

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Abstract

New York City was abuzz with labor struggles in December 2007. The most prominent were that of the Writers Guild of America (East), picketing as part of their nation-wide strike for a fair share of online and digital content “residuals.” NYC-based shows like Letterman’s *the Late Show*, the *Daily Show*, and *Saturday Night Live* languished for months without their creative workers. In December, though, another smaller intersecting struggle also erupted at one of the world’s largest media conglomerates, when Viacom’s vulnerable and (until then) unorganized ‘freelance’ workers (known in-house as “permalance”) walked off the job. The following comic and introduction present preliminary observations and themes from research conducted during this tumultuous time.

Introduction

NEW YORK CITY: On the Tuesday before Viacom’s (one of the six global mega media corporations) million-dollar holiday party, the conglomerate’s ‘freelance’ workers went to pick up their invitations and received a curious additional piece of paperwork. This ‘paperwork’ contained a cryptic rewriting of the employees’ benefits packages. Many of these employees – working for



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Nickelodeon, MTV and other MTV Networks (MTVN) – had worked in the same department doing the same job for years, some had families, others chronic illnesses. Almost as quickly (or perhaps faster) as the news was discussed in grumbles among the so-called freelancers, it filtered out of the building into the press, blogs, and online reports. The humiliating move was the last straw for many and they began to rally support for a protest. What began with the donning of protest T-shirts at the holiday party – most conveying some configuration of "Freelancers Get Cancer Too" – ended in the group walking off the job on Monday December 10, 2007. Labor struggle seemed to abound in New York that winter, as the Writers Guild of America (WGA-East & West) had also been on strike for six weeks. The WGA strike, representing US writers from film, TV, and radio against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP, on behalf of 397 US film and TV producers, i.e., CBS, MGM, NBC Universal, NewsCorp/Fox, WB, Disney, and Paramount), demanded increased shares of "residuals" or profits from content sold on DVDs and revenues from content distributed on cell phones, the Internet, and other new media. This action, picking up where a protracted strike 1988 left off (underestimating the revenue potential for video sales) began on November 5, 2007 and concluded on February 12, 2008.

I heard about the MTVN walkout in the national news on Tuesday, like most people not based in New York. So, I booked a flight for the following day to the city. My flight landed in the early afternoon and immediately (well, after stopping to buy a cheap digital replacement for my analog tape recorder) I headed to Times Square. I spent as long as I could (about a week) on *freezing* WGA and Viacom picket lines and doing interviews with writers from TV shows like *Saturday Night Live*, *Law and Order*, and the *Daily Show*, as well as an interview with the founder of the Freelancers Union. A condensed narrative of what I encountered in that time follows, to some degree, in the subsequent comic.

This comic was a bit of an accident. I threw a couple frames together using some software that came with my computer, as a way for me to kill some time on a long Chinatown bus ride from NYC to DC. It was also a way for me to sort out my images, ideas and themes from the week of interviews. The more I fiddled with it, the more photos and captions I added, the more excited I got about the drama of the pre-holiday collective dissent. Or, in true fetishized form, its dramatic tensions started to take on a life of their own. As it developed, I thought they would lend themselves to a kind of popular geography (or people's geography) of media labor politics: a comic book of heroes (full of power and ambivalence) and villains (vile and yet the products of circumstances not of their choosing).

There was the overt drama of the struggle's tactics and spectacles; of how the spaces of the city would be transformed and occupied by the once-collaborators, now arch-rivals (writers and producers), in their attempts to win for their cause. These were the political maneuvers of labor struggles, deeply spatial

and reliant on forms of urban spectacle to create an attentive public, send them messages, and perhaps transform dominant understandings of the world (see D’Arcus, 2006; Mitchell, 2003; Roost, 1998; Wainwright and Ortiz, 2006). Further, the excitement produced by these dramatic tensions seemed also to suggest a growing *solidarity* among labor groups and perhaps we were a step closer to a hegemonic compromise between blue- and white-collar workers (see Gramsci, 1971 or Hall, 1988).

But, then, as in any good comic book, there was also a more covert drama; a mysterious and shadowy force of evil seething “underneath” the picket signs, celebrity appearances, and slogans of both the WGA strike and the MTVN walkout. After all, why would the MTV Networks cut the “freelancers” benefits in a season of soaring profits? What do the writers of WGA want? Why do their producers want to keep them from getting it? In other words, what sinister forces are lurking in the background, demanding the exploitation of our protagonists?² And better, how do those forces function? This particular sinister force is the movement of finance capital and other *fictions*, both calling the shots and being struggled over (see Harvey, 1999; Marx, 1976). And, further, it is these products of human society that appear to inflict forms of violence against their laboring workers, freely circulated outside of their control. Such are the “fetish” politics of this particular (and perhaps all) labor struggle, whereby the laborers of TV shows find themselves beholden to or even beleaguered by that which they produce (see Marx, 1992).

Yet, perhaps the most burning mystery (however understated it may be in the comic) within this drama is the question of worker autonomy, particularly for the writers of the WGA. They are fighting for “residuals” or (simply put) revenue from video and online content. But, if the web is so important *and* everyone presumably has the ability to produce content and distribute it there, then why do the writers not say, “forget it, we’re running this show ourselves?” Why do the writers not cut out the bean counters and middlemen and become autonomous? This question is the same as, why are they walking in circles in the freezing cold when they could be otherwise working in warm offices making fairly good salaries? This mystery therefore precedes and follows from all the other dramatic themes of the struggle depicted in the comic.

Primarily, following from the above, there are four such themes that I would like to explore a bit to introduce the comic and all the suggested (or even hidden) conflicts, debates, and ideas it contains: 1) the overt drama of urban spectacle and the spatial dimensions of class struggle; 2) and likewise, the hegemonic and political questions of labor solidarities between different types of laborers; 3) the

² Or, can our heroes oppose this evil, without also somehow capitulating to it?

more covert drama of the movement of finance and *fictitious capital* within this process and the *force* of that fiction in the production process; and 4) the fetish character of this struggle, whereby workers within media are, perhaps, in the end beholden to or even abused by the products of their own labor. This essay and its companion comic (or vice versa), then, are my first pass at these questions and their significance but they are also basic, in a sense, embedded in everyone's daily lives. So, this is also an attempt to create an accessible medium through which to engage those simultaneously basic and mysterious, everyday but spectacularly dramatic issues. It is a drama of how our lives are both within our control and out of our control at the very same time.

Urban Spectacle and Spatial Struggle

After Giuliani and the “revanchist” redevelopment of Times Square in the mid-90s, urban spectacle became a kind of groundwork for New York City’s economic growth even if as eye candy for banking and finance. Granted, New Year’s Eve had been fixed in Times Square ever since the ball first dropped there in 1907. But the everyday spectacle brought to Times Square – mimicking that of NBC’s Today Show in Rockefeller Center – by MTV’s midtown studio in 1997 made the urban crowd, carrying signs, gathered outside a prominent media studio, a globalizing pop cultural form replicated around the world. The freelancer walkout at the MTV Networks echoed this spectacle. Taking over the same space usually occupied by teens gathered to try to catch a glimpse of their favorite celebrity and perhaps get on TV, the ‘freelancers’ used that space alternatively to embarrass the company. Using their creative powers, the workers took over the staging area for a seemingly endless party – what should appear to be “New Years Eve everyday” (Rosati 2005) – and made it political. They twisted MTV Networks brands and logos with slogans like, “THIS IS A KURT LODER OF CRAP,” “ROCK BAND / ROCK BOTTOM,” or “YO! MTV’S WHACK!,” to demonstrate against the company’s villainous labor practices. The huge inflatable cigar smoking pig used by the WGA (other unions will also sometimes use a huge inflatable rat) in front of the Viacom building is another example of this. They even created a logo for the struggle, morphing “MTV” into “WTF” (“What The Fuck???” in US text message code-speak), which they plastered across the landscape with stickers. If the city had been made into a machine for producing and circulating images and messages, then it also became simultaneously a site of struggle over those messages and politics. If the city and Times Square had become the center of a *permanent party*³ to celebrate distraction, capitalism, and consumerism, then the walkout and strikers captured that space and its infrastructure to advocate against the consequences of

³ See Frank (1997) for a thin but suggestive history of the idea of a capitalist permanent revolution in American business culture and marketing.

that party, exploitation. The solidarity of celebrities with that struggle enhanced its spectacle, and expanded its scale.

But, as these forms of resistance raged, attempts were still made to control the totalizing image of the permanent party. For instance, on the second day of the MTVN walkout, workers inside climbed ladders and closed the blinds of the Midtown studio's massive windows, to hide the protests below from the view of its cameras. Likewise, while the electric signs of MTV and M&Ms remain gleaming in the space (as a form of circulating property), the signs and logos from the struggle were *expunged* nearly as quickly as they were put up. This is the most obvious geographical dimension of this process.

Labor Solidarities

Perhaps it was just NYC, but as I arrived and encountered what seemed to be crowds of workers marching on every corner, I began to feel as though something special was happening; as though a new era of labor consciousness and solidarity was on the rise. This was probably wishful thinking. But, the seriousness of this possibility became clear as some of the workers in more traditionally "blue-collar" unions (i.e. the International Union of Operating Engineers or the United Auto Workers) expressed that they hoped that the Writers Guild would be more sympathetic to their activities. They had joined the WGA picket line as a form of outreach. Many of the writers and many of the MTVN freelancers that I talked to suggested that they now realized how important it was to think about and support labor issues and labor politics. They even suggested that there was certainly a greater appreciation of all unions and union politics after becoming embroiled in these struggles. This is quite an opportunity. Though, it was not a universally felt sentiment. One of the actors I met during "Daytime Writers Day" commented that he was not in favor of just indiscriminately supporting all workers' causes (not that I had suggested he should!). Further he remarked that many of the workers in other unions are "asking for too much." I found this a bit ironic since this labor struggle (the writers') was not for a "living wage," per se, but for a cut of money beyond what are, for many in the guild, already comfortable wages. In any case, the founder of the Freelancers Union, Sara Horowitz, agreed that something special was happening in the city, in terms of labor politics; that at some point the lack of respect for the work that people do is creating a kind of tipping point, testing workers' tolerance. What is perhaps most important, as it relates to labor solidarities, is the amount of public support that was rallied for the WGA. If similar support was leveraged in news media, youtube, and elsewhere for other union actions – like, for instance, NYC's Transit Workers, whose strike in 2005 was the victim of deeply negative press coverage – it could perhaps mean the development of a whole new public consciousness about labor issues. This will, it appears, require a memory of the crisis that brought the new

outlook and some institutional infrastructure for interaction and collaboration between the various labor groups.

The Force of Fictions

While the logistics of how the strike and walkout were waged are crucially important, there are the more sinister and mysterious dimensions of these events. As one MTVN freelancer's sign reading, "True Life: I Was Shat on by Capitalism," demonstrates, these are the larger issues of capital's exploitative and anti-human tendencies and forces of necessity. But, the sign demonstrates this as a dirty secret to be leveraged when conditions may get too bad. In the sense that TV writers and creative laborers are in the business of tending to and improving the "terrain" of audience time and attention (as well as moods and emotions, see Jhally, 1987; Rosati, 2007), which is rented to advertisers, they are also in the business of turning over capital investments, of circulating capital, and *realizing* values which until that moment, are held in *fictitious* claims on them. Their jobs are paid for with portions of operating budgets dedicated to the costs of realization. This is a cost responsible to investors and shareholders trying to turn fictional or claims to potential value into real value; and, ultimately, to turn invested money into *more* money. In this sense, their fortunes are limited and pressured by the, as yet unrealized, investments on the part of two groups: 1) investors in the industrial producers of commodities such as cars, movies, pimple cream, or anti-depressants must rent the eyeballs of Viacom's audiences; and 2) those investors in Viacom (for example, or other elements of the means of realization) who expect growth on their money based on what Viacom's networks can charge to rent those eyeballs.

So, two dramas arise here. First, this primary income stream, the investment in advertising commodities on the market is, for the WGA, what those workers are fighting for a bigger cut of. They are trying to capture a portion of this capital as it passes through the mechanisms of circulation; a portion that their bosses would already possess. Thus, they are beholden to the general productivity of marketing, advertising, and what Williams calls "the magic system," as a whole (see Williams, 2001). The contradiction of this is that they have not produced this value, it is value already exploited – or *to be exploited* – from workers in other parts of the circuit. The media companies, who own the means of producing audiences, desires, needs, "demand," must share as little of this income with their workers as possible, thus engaging a second order exploitation homologous to the first. Second, within the media corporation, the creative producers are the engines of growth for the fictitious value represented in company stocks. If a corporation is trying to create new 'growth' to appease their shareholders, its workers can create and sell more of their product, which in this case is its audiences' attention. Or, if that is not possible", to read as follows: "Or, if that is not possible, it can also increase the efficiency of its production, via layoffs, benefit cuts, and other

reductions in labor costs, the necessary labor time of audience production (and for the workers' reproduction, which likely means externalizing those costs elsewhere). All of this drama, of promises to be realized and the force behind such labor struggles, erupts primarily from a *fiction*, from something that is both the logistic of exploitative growth and that makes exploitative growth *necessary*. This is, of course, also ironic given that the writers produce fictions in the literal sense as well.

The Fetish

So, shareholders, financiers and investment capitalists all demand that their money grow, that money becomes *more money*. This formulation, or relation of appearances in circulation, is the world turned on its head, in which the products of human beings confront us as independent beings, alive and able to control our future, as *fetishes*. Therefore, the MTV Networks must find increasing ways to produce the appearance of growth and productivity in their company. The same pressure is happening in the production of cars, lip balm, deodorant, and videogames. And therefore, those productions appeal to the media, the harvesters of audiences, to lubricate circulation and aid in the realization of the initial demand, *that money yield more money*. It is this pressure, this fetishized appearance, in which exploitation seems to move on its own. To apply Debord's notion of the "spectacle" creatively, this *financial fetish* is "the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself" (1994: 2). Such an apparent "*autonomous* movement of the non-living" is crucial for several reasons. First, it hides the logistics of how the force of the fictions comes into being. Second, it flattens all exploitative processes into a struggle for money, without any inquest into where such things develop. Lastly, and most importantly, it is the high levels of finance capital wielded by the media companies that allow for the production of widely popular TV and other electronic cultural forms. For all involved parties, their financial accounting defines their success or failure, and all mysteries are resolved in the money form.

I asked some of the workers why they don't just forget all about the companies they work for, become autonomous, and make their own shows – after all, this is the internet age? One responded instructively: well, some of us will probably do some of that but in order to really get paid for making TV, in order to really make popular TV [for instance], it really takes a kind of financing that we don't have by ourselves. No longer – or at least to a lesser degree – confined by oligarchic ownership over all *channels* of distribution, the creative workers are in effect beholden to the circulation of money derived from the advertising economy. It is a different kind of violence though the relations of their consent to corporate authority seem to remain the same.

Without further hand waving, then, read the comic (maybe even more deeply than I have) and make your own!

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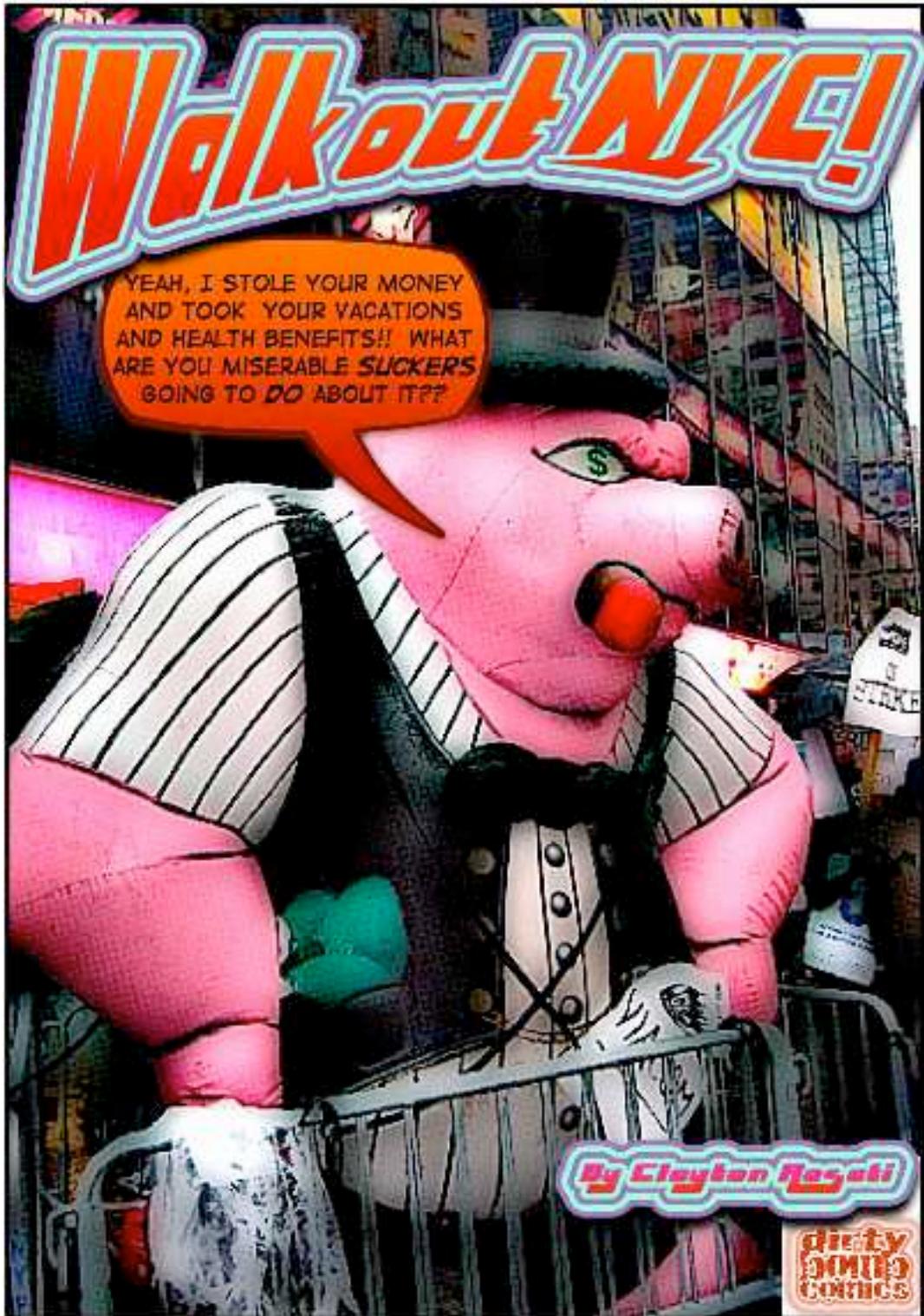
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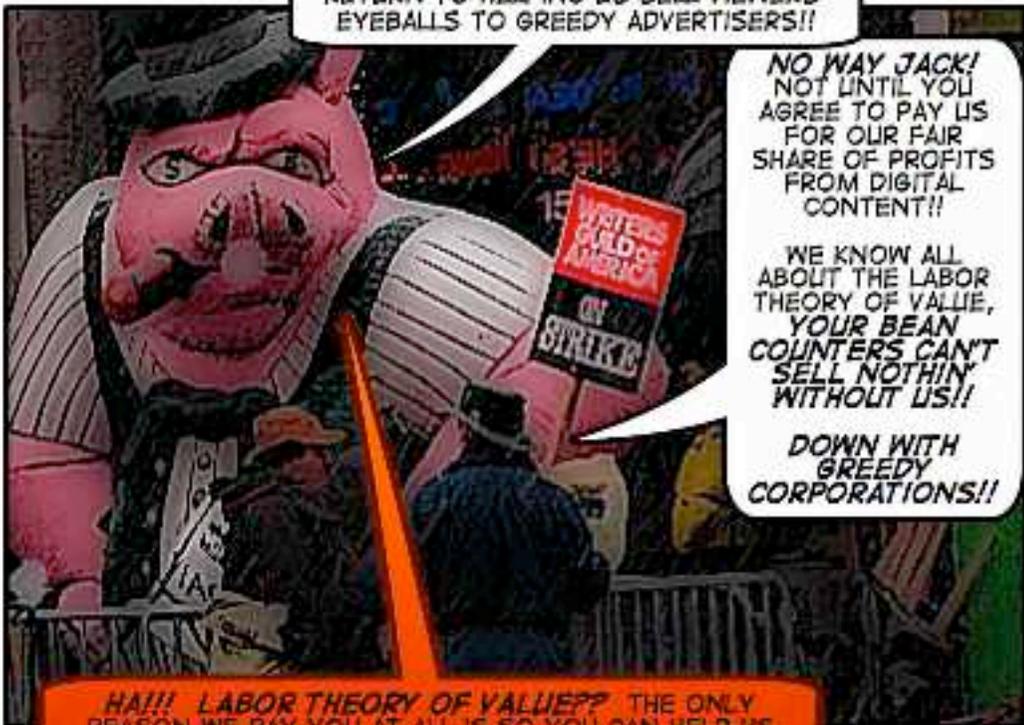




11AM THURSDAY, BRAVING SLEET, RAIN, SNOW AND 30-DEGREE TEMPERATURES, THE STRIKING WRITERS GUILD (NEARLY THREE MONTHS ON THE PICKET LINES) JOINS THE PARTY AT THE VIACOM BUILDING.



C'MON, BE GOOD WORKERS AND RETURN TO HELPING US SELL VIEWERS' EYEBALLS TO GREEDY ADVERTISERS!!



NO WAY JACK!
NOT UNTIL YOU AGREE TO PAY US FOR OUR FAIR SHARE OF PROFITS FROM DIGITAL CONTENT!!

WE KNOW ALL ABOUT THE LABOR THEORY OF VALUE,
YOUR BEAN COUNTERS CAN'T SELL NOTHIN' WITHOUT US!!

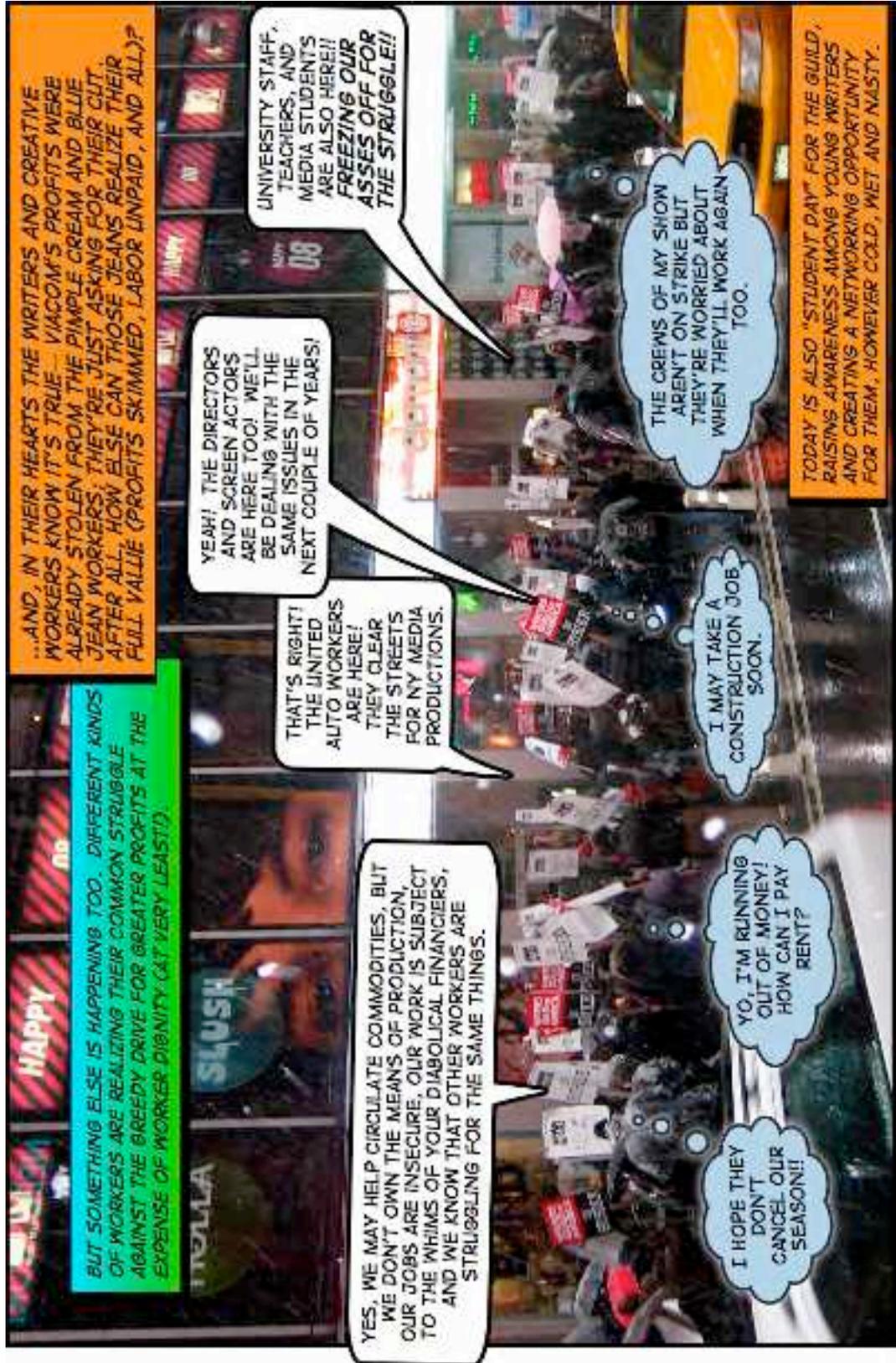
DOWN WITH GREEDY CORPORATIONS!!

HA!!! LABOR THEORY OF VALUE?? THE ONLY REASON WE PAY YOU AT ALL IS SO YOU CAN HELP US SELL PIMPLE CREAM, AND DEODORANT, AND THE LATEST PRE-RIPPED BLUE JEANS, AND ARMY RECRUITMENT!



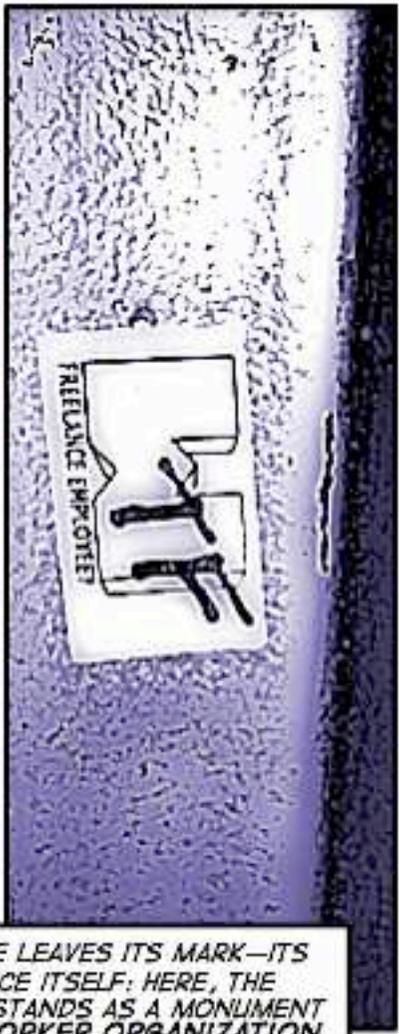
YOU'RE NOTHIN' BUT GLORIFIED SALESMEN!







AN ERA OF SOLIDARITY SEEMS TO BE ON THE RISE!

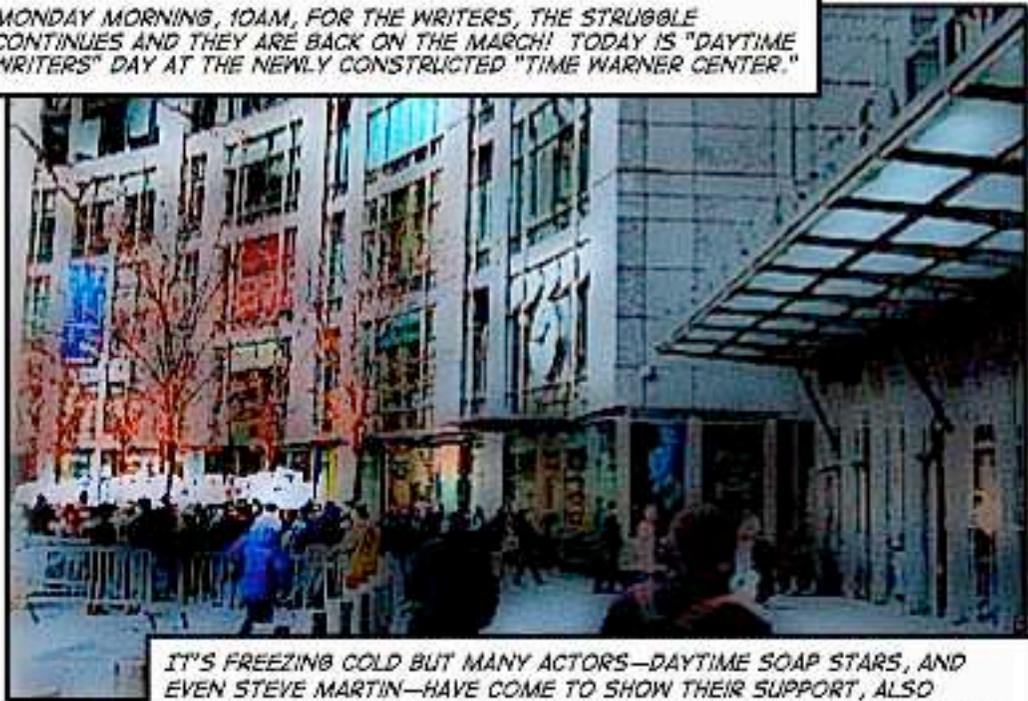


AND, THE RESISTANCE LEAVES ITS MARK—ITS BRAND—ON THE SPACE ITSELF: HERE, THE 44TH ST. LAMPOST STANDS AS A MONUMENT TO OUTRAGE AND WORKER ORGANIZATION.





MONDAY MORNING, 10AM, FOR THE WRITERS, THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES AND THEY ARE BACK ON THE MARCH! TODAY IS "DAYTIME WRITERS" DAY AT THE NEWLY CONSTRUCTED "TIME WARNER CENTER."



IT'S FREEZING COLD BUT MANY ACTORS—DAYTIME SOAP STARS, AND EVEN STEVE MARTIN—HAVE COME TO SHOW THEIR SUPPORT, ALSO KNOWING THAT THEY WILL EVENTUALLY STRUGGLE FOR A SIMILAR CAUSE.





DEF JAM "PAID" ME TO STAND OUT HERE IN THIS COLD ASS WEATHER!! I'M REALLY HYPED ABOUT IT, THOUGH!! I'M LUCKY MY GIRLFRIEND'S A GOOD SPORT.



EVEN THE LAMPPOST HAD BEEN CLEANED OF ANY TRACE OF DISILLUSIONMENT OR SEMI-DIGNIFIED RESISTANCE... WTF???

TUESDAY, DOWNTOWN, NEAR CITY HALL... THE LAST PUBLIC PUSH BEFORE XMAS... IT'S "CRIME WRITERS" DAY AND DRAMA IS IN THE COLD MORNING AIR.

"WE HEREBY CHARGE THE OWNERS OF THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION WITH VILLAINY!!"



YEAH, WE'RE TALENTED AND WE COULD CONCEIVABLY TRY TO BE ALTONOMOUS, USE THE INTERNET, ETC... BUT WHAT REALLY MAKES POPULAR TV AND WILL ACTUALLY PAY US IS THE HIGH-COST PRODUCTION VALUE THAT ONLY THE CONGLOMERATES ARE ABLE TO FINANCE WITH ANY CONSISTENCY.



AGAIN, CELEBRITIES ARE MOBILIZED TO CAPTURE AND CONTROL THE CIRCULATION OF REPRESENTATIONS OF THE STRUGGLE.



SO, THE PICKETERS ENDURE IN THEIR EPIC CONFLICT, KNOWING THAT "RESIDUALS" WILL NOT REALLY BRING THEM FREEDOM...

