

Storyboards and Solidarity

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The current Hollywood strikes have a precedent in Disney's golden age, when the company was a hothouse of innovation and punishing expectation.

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Reviewed:

The Disney Revolt: The Great Labor War of Animation's Golden Age

by Jake S. Friedman

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Kosti Ruohomaa/Cowan-Fouts Collection

Disney strikers picketing the premiere of *The Reluctant Dragon*, Los Angeles, July 1941

Steiner Studios, at the old Brooklyn Navy Yard, was quiet when I visited on a hot morning at the end of May. The Writers Guild of America, which has about 11,000 members, was in the fourth week of a national strike, and though most of the trouble was brewing in Los Angeles, the union had also called for daily pickets at on-location shoots and studios in New York. Two employees of *Late Night with Seth Meyers* arrived just after eight o'clock, followed by a playwright and Harvard lecturer who writes TV scripts to make ends meet. Traffic through the studio gate was light. A man pulling out in an Escalade yelled to us: "There's no filming today. Good luck!"

The strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers is mostly over streaming. Since the last Writers Guild strike, in 2008, tech companies like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and Apple have

undercut hard-won standards in an industry once dominated by NBC Universal, Fox, Paramount, and Warner Bros., leaving writers with less money, lopped-off career paths, threats to intellectual property (especially with advances in artificial intelligence), and unreliable schedules. The companies refuse to share viewer statistics, which means that writers on popular shows are probably getting too little in residuals (royalties). Another big change has been the emergence of “mini rooms.” Television writers’ rooms, which once involved a dozen people working for months each season, have shrunk in manpower and duration. Scriptwriting is “going the way of journalism,” multiple people told me—a terrifying indictment.

Union members had been asked to walk the line twenty hours per week, and in Brooklyn more strikers soon showed up, sweaty on the sidewalk. A Writers Guild van dropped off a bundle of picket signs. A woman in a black STRIKE CAPTAIN hat, gripping an iced coffee, checked people in on her phone. Her name, she told me, is L.E. Correia, and she works as a writer on *Big Mouth*, Netflix’s longest-running show—an adult cartoon about a cute, big-headed pubescent boy who’s alternately mentored and tormented by a satyr-like hormone monster.

Correia is on the union’s animation caucus and a rare unionized writer in animated television. (Her first job was on a nonunion animated show.) Only a few prestige series—such as *The Simpsons*, *Bob’s Burgers*, and *Tuca & Bertie*—are covered by the Writers Guild. Writers on other shows, including programs on Nickelodeon, belong to a separate union called the Animation Guild, Local 839 of IATSE (pronounced I-ought-see: the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts). The Animation Guild bargained its latest industry-wide contract last year, with the same employers’ group that the Writers Guild is striking against.

There is little difference in the day-to-day work of writing for live action versus writing for a cartoon. But in the Animation Guild writers are grouped with storyboard artists and character designers, whose labor has long been undervalued as rote, even though the more repetitive aspects of animation work in television—making a character move, bringing backgrounds to life—have been outsourced, mostly to Korea, since the 1970s. As a result, a writer in the Animation Guild makes about \$2,500 per week, compared to \$5,000 plus residuals in the Writers Guild. Nonunion work tends to be paid on a freelance basis, per gig or per script.

Because the Animation Guild wasn’t on strike, any writer who belonged to the Writers Guild but was currently on an Animation Guild show had to work through the strike. In this uncomfortable loophole, the studios spotted an opportunity. Correia told me that many striking writers had suddenly been offered jobs on animated shows that were either nonunion or under an Animation Guild

contract. “But a lot of writers are choosing not to do that, ’cause there are a zillion ways that studios try to get us to scab,” she said. In any case, Writers Guild members found it hard to settle for Animation Guild wages. “This goes back,” she said, “to Disney classifying writers as animators.”

Animation has always had to defend itself against accusations of triviality, both as a medium and as a profession. Historically, it’s been considered kids’ stuff. The absence of on-screen stars, combined with the invisible, repetitious labor of drawing, meant that writers, storyboard artists, colorists, and character animators had less leverage against the boss, and consequently earned less pay.

One of the earliest and most memorable strikes in Hollywood was staged by this workforce—at Disney, in 1941. Images from the period have cropped up again in recent weeks, due in part to the exquisite protest signs, like Pluto asserting, “I’d rather be a dog than a scab,” or, in a boldface allusion to Mickey, “Are We Mice or Men?” A new book, *The Disney Revolt* by the cartoonist Jake S. Friedman, examines what was happening at the studios during animation’s golden age. Early Disney was a hothouse of wondrous artistic innovation and punishing expectations. The consequences of animation workers’ coming to see themselves as a laboring class, and the demands they made of their employer and their union, are still being sorted out today.

Friedman’s book is a kind of double biography, with Walt Disney on one side and Art Babbitt, the studio’s leading artist, on the other. Disney and Babbitt were born six years apart, in the first decade of the twentieth century, and in similar circumstances. Both grew up poor in the Midwest. Both had fathers who were true believers, played the violin, and failed as breadwinners.

Elias, Disney’s father, was a committed socialist and a member of an agricultural cooperative before he lost the family farm and invested in a struggling soda and jelly company. Solomon, Babbitt’s father, was a devout Jewish immigrant who sold fish and rags until he suffered a spinal injury in a carriage accident. Disney’s childhood experience turned him against Debs-style leftists and the labor movement, while Babbitt absorbed a do-gooding idealism. As an adult, Babbitt was a mischievous, innately talented draftsman whom Disney hoped to make a company man.

Disney recruited Babbitt to Los Angeles in 1932 from Terrytoons, a workshop in New York known for its *Aesop’s Fables* series. The Disney name already meant something: the company was founded in 1923 and had an early hit in *Steamboat Willie*, the 1928 short that introduced jaunty, black-and-white Mickey and Minnie Mouse to the world. Walt and his brother Roy invested everything they had in the studio—in gritty Silver Lake, east of Hollywood—and endeavored to pull it through the Great Depression. They equipped their animation staff

with the latest technology, including a test camera and table-mounted Moviola machines to preview the artists' transparent cels, flipbook style.

In other respects, though, the Disney studio was like every other animation workshop: men wrote the stories and developed the characters, while women were relegated to the “henhouse” of ink and paint. (In Friedman's book, women are girlfriends and wives and models for the men's consumption, never artists.¹) The pay was low, the hours long, the assembly line perpetual. “A Disney animator was expected to complete about five seconds of footage a week,” Friedman writes, and each second meant twelve to twenty-four drawings per character.

Animation, up to then, had been all about the gag. Characters endeared themselves to audiences in short sequences not dissimilar from a comic strip. Walt and his lead animators—Babbitt, Bill Tytla, Les Clark, Fred Moore—vowed to explode the medium. They borrowed from Chaplin, *Nosferatu*, and Fred Astaire. Babbitt brought live figure-drawing classes to the studio, which evolved into the Great Disney Art School, led by Donald Graham of the Chouinard Art Institute. (Babbitt also made ethically dubious use of a handheld movie camera: at a “Main Street burlesque house,” he filmed naked women dancers and a standup comic whose movements he repurposed for the design of a dwarf in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.) There was no real distinction between writing and animating. The storyboarders and lead animators shaped plot as they went along, using the kernels provided by Walt.

According to Friedman, Babbitt was the first cartoonist to create in-depth profiles of animated characters, the way a novelist might create a backstory for her protagonist. Goofy “is very courteous and apologetic and his faux pas embarrass him,” Babbitt wrote. “He is in close contact with sprites, goblins, fairies and other such fantasia.” (Friedman only partially quotes a more troubling line from this character study: “Think of the Goof as a composite of an everlasting optimist, a gullible Good Samaritan, a half-wit, a shiftless, good-natured coloured boy and a hick.”)

In 1934 Walt announced plans to make what he proclaimed would be the world's first-ever animated feature. (He either failed to acknowledge, or wasn't aware of, earlier full-length works by Quirino Cristiani in Argentina or Lotte Reiniger in Germany.) *Snow White*, eventually released in December 1937, became his obsession. The production of the film led to “harrowing” conditions for workers, Friedman writes: “Each inker was expected to trace thirty cels per day and each painter to complete seventeen cels a day.” The strain of this project pushed Walt and Roy toward a more authoritarian, corporate model for the studio—and pushed Babbitt and the rest of the staff to

unionize with the Screen Cartoonists Guild, which later became the Animation Guild. The mid-1930s to the end of the 1941 strike make up most of *The Disney Revolt*.

American labor history is filled with weird flip-flops and betrayals, but the journey of the Animation Guild may rank among the strangest. The guild is now Local 839 of IATSE, a large North American union that represents some 168,000 workers in the entertainment trades. But IATSE was once the nemesis of the Animation Guild's predecessor. In the labor tumult of the 1930s and 1940s, IATSE was more a racketeering front than a union. Its leaders in Hollywood, the union president George Browne and Willie Bioff, an ally of Al Capone's, extorted business from studio chiefs and workers under threat of violence. In 1938 a challenger emerged in animation: the Screen Cartoonists Guild, led by Herb Sorrell, a boxer and housepainter turned organizer. "Of all the many crafts in Hollywood, animation was the last to get unionized," Friedman writes.

Sorrell's Screen Cartoonists Guild and Bioff's IATSE competed for inroads into Disney. Workers there wanted higher pay, regular schedules, a grievance process, and job security—at the time apprentices auditioned for months with no guarantee of real employment. Walt, Roy, and their scurrilous lawyer, Gunther Lessing, hated the idea of a union. They convinced Babbitt, who was seen as the leader of the staff, to form an in-house employee club, a company union that they could control. Babbitt was naive at first, believing that the company might negotiate in good faith. "I knew nothing about unions and really stepped into this," he later said.

The "*Snow White* crunch" had set off a rebellion. Disney took out numerous loans to pay for the film and forced people to work on it for more than ten hours a day for no additional pay. On previous projects, management had given out bonuses and experimented with profit sharing; again, Babbitt believed that the workers' reward would come. After *Snow White* premiered at the end of 1937, the animators, background artists, designers, story adapters, and creative supervisors thrilled at seeing their names in the credits—a first for a Disney film. But they saw nothing of its record profits of \$6.7 million.

Babbitt and his colleagues—including Dave Hilberman, Tytla's assistant, who'd studied art on a tour of Russia and later joined the Communist Party—read news stories about the sit-down strikes at General Motors in Michigan and the first-ever animation strike in New York. They tried to turn Disney's company union into an actual union, with supermajority support. Management refused to recognize it.

In 1940 Disney became a publicly traded corporation and relocated from Silver Lake to a posh, custom-built studio in Burbank. The US economy boomed on account of World War II, but the European film market shriveled, and Disney resorted to mass layoffs and pay cuts.

Babbitt was outraged to learn that his animation assistant was being paid just twenty-five dollars per week. In February 1941 Disney workers attended a Screen Cartoonists Guild organizing meeting convened by Sorrell and the American Federation of Labor (AFL), with celebrity cameos by Dorothy Parker and the screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart. More than 250 Disney animators signed cards to join. The artists at Universal Pictures' animation studio did, too.

Babbitt was voted union chairman and immediately found himself cut out of work on Disney's next project, *Dumbo*. The company refused to bargain, not only with its artists but also with its editors, drivers, plasterers, and film technicians. Management created yet another company union to try to ward off the Screen Cartoonists Guild. In May 1941 a majority of Disney workers voted to strike. The decision was perhaps too hasty: only about half the animators walked the picket line when the strike began. Still, lab technicians stopped handling Disney film, carpenters refused to cross the picket line, and the AFL called for a boycott.²

Walt did all he could to fight the union. He hired a union buster and had surveillance photos taken of all the strikers. He threatened to close the studio. And he fired Babbitt, after which a group of unidentified "loyalists" calling itself the Committee of 21 accused the Screen Cartoonists Guild of ties to Russian Communists. Walt wrote in a full-page spread in *Variety*, "I am positively convinced that Communistic agitation, leadership, and activities have brought about this strike." (In his book, Friedman defends Walt against charges of antisemitism; some historians are less indulgent.³)

Over the course of *The Disney Revolt*, Friedman's storytelling starts to feel ill-matched to the stakes. By giving equal weight to Walt and Babbitt, he reduces a confrontation of power—mustachioed celebrity CEO (though Disney's \$100 billion future wasn't yet foreseeable) versus unknown, underpaid artists—to a personality clash. Friedman cannot shake his admiring impression of the young, striving Walt; he winds up making apologies for his dictatorial style. Disney workers who balked at the union and crossed the picket line, for Friedman, were not strikebreakers and certainly not scabs; they were "non-strikers" and company "loyalists." Nor does Friedman address the antisemitic redbaiting that Walt would help spread throughout Hollywood and beyond.

A month into the strike, Walt made a devil's bargain. If there had to be a union at Disney, he preferred one that could be bought off. He went to Bioff, the mob-adjacent IATSE leader, who promised to end the strike and the AFL boycott. "The very purpose of forming an independent cartoonists' union had been to block Bioff at Disney, and now it appeared that Disney would use Bioff to block them—the independent union," Friedman writes. Bioff's plan was for AFL leaders to transport Babbitt and other negotiators with the Screen Cartoonists

Guild to a secret location in the San Fernando Valley and coerce them to sign a contract. But when the animators found out “that the contract would be signed at Willie Bioff’s ranch,” they “leaped from the vehicle and returned to Guild headquarters.”

Having exhausted this last try and eager to leave on a government-sponsored friendship tour of South America, Walt called on a federal arbitrator, and the Screen Cartoonists Guild agreed to talk. In late July, after nine weeks, the strike came to a negotiated end. The union won all its demands: a closed shop, raises, reduced hours, overtime and back pay, gender parity, and a grievance procedure.

Here is where the book ends, save a brief epilogue, sparing the author a dreary coda. Walt held a grudge and sharpened his rapier. In 1944 he became active in the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, and in 1947 he testified against Hilberman and other members of the Screen Cartoonists Guild before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

Babbitt was hired at United Productions of America, a studio founded by ex-Disney strikers, and later Hanna-Barbera.⁴ He also became a renowned teacher of animation. The same year as the Disney strike, Sorrell formed the Conference of Studio Unions as a counterweight to IATSE. But his industrial confederation was battered in a long, violent strike in 1945, then redbaited to death by HUAC.⁵ By 1951 the Screen Cartoonists Guild was moribund, and the cartoonists at Disney voted to join IATSE Local 839.

After a period of labor peace, the Animation Guild was nearly wiped out in the 1970s and early 1980s. Ink-and-paint and character animation were sent abroad as part of a larger pattern of globalization. The workflow that in the early days of Disney was split between men (for conceptual and story-oriented work) and women (for coloring and frame-by-frame execution) was now split between the US and East Asia, especially on television series.⁶ Union membership dropped into the hundreds.

The union was saved, unexpectedly, by the animation revival of the late 1980s, with hits like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *The Simpsons*, followed by *Beavis and Butthead* and *Toy Story*. Unionized film studios reinvigorated their animation departments, and workers in TV began to organize—with the Animation Guild and other unions. *The Simpsons* started out nonunion in 1989. Then, in 1998, its writers successfully negotiated for increased pay and membership in the Writers Guild of America, to bring them on par with writers in live-action TV. Their agreement covered other animated shows on 20th Century Fox, including *Futurama*, *Family Guy*, and *King of the Hill*.

But few other shows were popular enough for their writers to win live-action standards. David A. Goodman, who wrote on *Family Guy* and *Futurama* and later became president of the WGA West, recalled a wonky union divide on individual shows. Aside from the writers, he told me, “the storyboarders and artists, character designers, and timers—all those people who work in the US—were covered under the Animation Guild.” Their labor was no less creative, no less relevant to narrative development. But by dint of job title and labor history, they were compensated at a fraction of what the members of the Writers Guild received.

Today the Animation Guild represents more than six thousand people in a range of professions: character modelers, technical directors, texture artists, environment artists, composers, and, yes, writers, to name just a few. Some of these workers are employed in-house and year-round, while others do short-term gigs. Steve Kaplan, a cartoonist and a business agent for the Animation Guild, told me that the Writers Guild’s contract “is a lot stronger for writers, because that’s all they focus on. IATSE focuses on a number of classifications and historically hasn’t focused on animation writing.” But getting closer to parity is a long-term goal of the Animation Guild, which has evolved from a conservative “focus on contract enforcement” position to a more active strategy of organizing and “member engagement.”

By early summer, the knock-on effects of the Writers Guild strike, along with a contraction of animation work from the height of the pandemic (when live action wasn’t possible), were being felt. In July a much larger and more visible union, SAG–AFTRA—which represents roughly 160,000 actors, dancers, singers, announcers, and other media workers—started its own strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers. Hotel workers in Hollywood went on strike, too. Animation and the rest of show business slowed down, but union business kept going. The Writers Guild’s animation caucus held a cartoon-themed picket in Manhattan and announced plans to unionize animation writers, especially on children’s shows on the East Coast. Workers in visual effects, a long-neglected craft adjacent to animation, have filed for elections to unionize at both Disney and Marvel Studios. IATSE also designated the Animation Guild as a national local, giving it a mandate to unionize animation workers across the US.

Sam Tung, an Animation Guild member and storyboard artist in Southern California, told me that, despite IATSE’s history, “the Animation Guild is a very active union, maybe because it skews young. It’s more socialist and union-minded.” He cited its encouragement of young leaders: he is part of a new task force that’s tracking the spread of artificial intelligence in the industry. The Animation Guild has expanded beyond its usual jurisdiction of greater Los Angeles to organize shops in Austin (Powerhouse Animation), Puerto Rico (Gladius), and New York (Titmouse, Stephen Colbert Presents Tooning

Out the News). At Disney and other studios, it has started to unionize new groups of workers in low-paid jobs such as animation production, IT, and reception.

Earlier this year, Disney—whose CEO, Bob Iger, is paid \$31 million per year—contested the right of certain animation-production workers to organize, calling them “supervisors,” which the National Labor Relations Board is now adjudicating. And Disney has yet to start negotiating with more than a hundred office workers—on *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *American Dad!*—who formed a union last year. To Kaplan, of the Animation Guild, history seemed to be on loop. Once again, he told me, “We are in a bitter fight with Disney.”

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1. For a helpful account of women and minority men in early animation, see Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson* (University Press of Kentucky, 2006). ↩
2. Tom Sito describes Babbitt as a determined but clumsy strategist: during the strike, he heard that leaders of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) were going to be meeting in Burbank, “so he went to plead for help. Art was so politically naïve he did not know that his guild was an AF of L affiliate and that the AF of L and the CIO at that time were bitter rivals. Babbitt found out his mistake as he was invited up to speak, but, rather than back away, he went right at it. ‘I suppose you’re CIO and I’m AF of L. I don’t know what those damned initials mean. All I know is I’m pro-union and my people are on strike and need your help.’” ↩
3. In *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930–1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, and Trade Unionists* (University of Texas Press, 2001), Gerald Horne notes that Disney visited with Mussolini in Italy and entertained Leni Riefenstahl on her tour of the United States. ↩
4. John Hubley, another legendary animator who left Disney for UPA after the strike, described his dual pursuit of an updated visual language (more “Picasso, Dufy, Matisse...than a Disney eighteenth-century watercolor”) and opportunity for social critique (“a comment on the times and problems of the people”). For more, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1997). ↩
5. Gerald Horne documents how anticommunism dovetailed with union busting, antisemitism, and the mafia-backed operations of IATSE to shred democratic organizing in Hollywood. ↩

6. In the introductory sequence to a *Simpsons* episode from 2010, the street artist Banksy depicts the outsourced animation studio as a dung-colored subterranean sweatshop. One South Korean artist called the sequence “degrading” and pointed out that his weekly work for the show took place in a high-tech building in Seoul. ↵