



Strike Captains

A slice of life on the line.

Written by Lisa Rosen

I became a strike captain the way I think most strike captains got their job, which is that nobody else wanted to do it.”

So says Breen Frazier, but the sentiment could apply to any number of the 300 strike captains working the lines. When the Guild sent a request to his *Ghost Whisperer* office, producer Frazier decided to step up. “I was kind of fascinated. I’ve never been a part of a union movement or really taken sides in any serious political issue, so to get a good look at what the strike would be like as a captain, I thought, would be educational and fun.”

And loads of work. No, maybe he didn’t expect that part, but he got used to it. In addition to his strike captain duties, he joined the Headquarters committee as a coordinator, ostensibly a four-hour weekly shift but in reality one that takes up so much time he’s rarely able to hit the picket line anymore. “I miss [walking the line] desperately. Not because I like walking in circles more than the next guy,” he adds, but because he thinks it’s better for morale when his team sees him out there. “So I’m really, really impressed that, pretty much to a person, every member of my team is on the line.”

Frazier compares HQ to Grand Central Station, and he’s been floored by the amount of work that volunteers are doing—van loaders, information officers who take calls, coordinators, picket support—“the ones who get the calls that say, ‘We’re out of trash bags at Universal.’”

“All of us just get a sense of the awesome amount of work that this is taking,” marvels Frazier, “the sheer incalculability of how many people are devoting their lives and their time and every single drop of energy that they have”... including Guild staff Jason Allen, Susan Baronoff, and Antonio Kelly, who were putting in 12-hour days in the first weeks of the strike.

Thank God for the Internet. Not for its prominent role in the negotiations, but for its part in the dissemination of strike information. Just how did anyone find out anything during the strike of 1988? Some kind of ancient system involving

binders and recorded phone hotlines. These days, Ann Fariday, Strategic Organizer in the Member Services Department, shoots informational e-mails to the strike captains, who then blast them to their teams.

Live from the Bunker

HQ, formerly a members’ lounge, is located on the first floor of the Guild. A private security guard in suit and tie is stationed at the front door, but it’s an otherwise inviting space, if occasionally frenetic.

On an easel by the entrance, poster paper is scrawled with news written with colored Sharpies:

—1/7 Leonard Nimoy called to say he refused to go on *The Colbert Report!*

—1/8 The Barham gate had teamster who refused to cross the picket line!

Taped signs on the walls read:

REPORT SCABS #4898

DOES YOUR CALLER HAVE COMPLAINTS THAT WE’RE ON STRIKE?, then provides AMPTP chief negotiator Nick Counter’s name, the AMPTP phone number, and website address.

One entire wall of items found on the line, set up by Joan Considine Johnson (*Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye*), resembles a mini-Gap store. Volunteers sit at phone lines patiently answering calls, talking politics, or reviewing the relative merits of the latest award nominations.

“Instead of *Give me your tired, your poor*, I like to think of headquarters as *Give me your aching backs, your tired feet, your slipped discs*,” says Frazier, “because when you’re too exhausted or there’s some sort of medical condition that keeps you off the line, you can work here.” And even though the HQ shift is an hour longer than the picket shift, nobody complains.

One elegant older gentleman, a strike button fastened to his

Courageous



sweater, finishes his phone shift and says his goodbyes. As he leaves, another volunteer mentions one of his credits, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*. The rest of the room looks on with admiration at Peter Nelson's retreating back. "I wouldn't mind if Maggie Smith starred in my movie," one says wistfully.

Later, the action pauses as Jason Allen plays "Murder Unscripted" on his computer. It's a hilarious take on what procedurals would be like without writers. That segues into a viewing of "Ask a Ninja Special Delivery #17: Writer's Strike." The ninja doesn't advocate violence to the strikers; "I'm just saying it works, and I highly suggest using it."

Of the following semi-random sampling of roughly 2 percent of the strike captains out on the line, none echoed the Ninja approach, and they seem to be doing pretty well with their own strategies.

Besides, an e-mail can go far in dispensing inspiration along with information:

From: Kit Boss

Date: December 10, 2007

Subject: re: here comes TUESDAY

Captains Courageous,

Well, we made it through another Universal Monday, even after spending the entire noon-3 shift trying to control One Giant Picket Line.

By majority voice vote, tomorrow afternoon we'll revert back to our more manageable gate-by-gate picketing. But not—I repeat, NOT—because things got a little out of hand and the One Giant Picket Line overturned three LAPD cruisers then divided in half and became a game of Red Rover that decapitated Joe Keenan.

We will all miss Joe. On the bright side, the odds just improved considerably for the rest of us to win an Emmy.

In other tragedies, our numbers yesterday sucked a bit of



Kit Boss

ELIZABETH CLOPTON

RON TAMMARIELLO

wang: We signed in 114 bodies in the a.m.; the p.m. count hit 55.

To give you some perspective, last week we averaged 200 picketers, total, for a.m. and p.m. combined.

... Make no mistake, though: Tomorrow belongs to Universal.

Heroes writers and stars will be picketing our beloved Main Gate from noon-3 p.m. T-shirts and comics will be handed out to fans who show up. Maybe Masi Oka will use his super-willpower to stop not only time but also that nasty stench that rises up from the storm drain.

And the entire day, all our gates will be a tad bit prettier and speak with better diction thanks to the presence of the Actor-Friend hyphenates we've invited to picket with us. Yes, I've made sure Bill Nye the Science Guy will be there. And yes, ladies, the line forms behind me.



Patti Carr

RON TAMMARIELLO

Patti Carr, CBS Radford Gate

Patti Carr, whose credits include *Til Death* and *Reba*, is a member picket coordinator as well as strike captain, so she signs people in at Radford on the morning shift. The turnout on a Tuesday in January is good—50 by 10 a.m., about 200 throughout the day.

She's been involved with Guild actions for a couple of years "because I was so impressed with Patric Verrone and his house-party meetings." From there she attended rallies, and picket lines protesting exploitation of writers on *America's Next Top Model*. So when it came time to call for strike captains, "I just kind of went on the principle that if I can do it I should do it. So that's how I got rooked into the whole thing."

Carr and her fellow captains attend regular strike captain meetings, report back to their teams, and answer any questions people have about the latest turns of events. Carr also came up with the idea of leafleting malls and theaters during the holidays, a plan that was carried out in almost every state and acquainted her and many other writers with the workings of mall security. "I thought, *Oh God I might have gotten people arrested all over the country*," she says, but adds that the public response was so supportive it was worth the hassle.

She sends her team the occasional morale-boosting e-mail, but "their morale is fairly boosted," she insists. "I haven't had to talk anybody down off a ledge or anything like that."

Jack Amiel, another strike captain, chimes in, "Thank God we still have our mental health benefits." Carr praises Amiel for joining up as a captain after the strike started: "He actually knew what he was getting into, as opposed to the rest of us."

Amiel (*Raising Helen*, two pilots this season) calls the feeling on the Radford line "very haimish Valley. Because most of us are sitcom writers, we've all worked together, or we have one degree of separation, or we've been fired by the same person, so we're sort of brothers in arms—the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Carr agrees: "Either we attract a really happy and dedicated crowd, or the shade and the lack of a spotlight makes everybody feel good. We don't have to stop, we do a continuous circle."

Carol Starr Schneider, also a strike captain, mentions that some of her team members have back issues, as in spinal: "I've got people getting epidurals," she says. Suggests Carr, "That may be why we're such a happy line. I do believe half the people here are on Vicodin."

Amiel notes that two of his team members said they couldn't picket because they have war wounds. "I thought that was impressive," he says. Carr demurs: "Writers consider it a war wound if they were on a bad show."

Alexandra Cunningham, NBC Alameda gate

No epidurals here; NBC gate is going for the burn. No lights or crosswalks break their stride. "The *Desperate Housewives* team likes to move," co-executive producer Alex Cunningham says of her people, "so this is the perfect gate for us. We end up doing a 10-mile loop over three hours, that's what we want." Someone on a pedometer registered six miles in three hours, but Cunningham believes that if you cut around the slower walkers, you can pick up the pace.

She took on the strike captain role because Marc Cherry asked her to. "I still kind of don't know why," she says. "Maybe it's because I have a scary personality and seem like I might bust out and kill people at any given moment. He thought that might be motivating, that people would be frightened and would come out. They really did not need to be ruled by fear; my team would show up anyway because they believe in the cause."

Evidence supporting Cherry's intuition is found with the fact that her team doubled from its original 20 members to 40 throughout the weeks. Could have something to do with her e-mails, cited and forwarded by other strike captains for their motivational nature. Not to mention their insights into her personal life, which made an appearance on the line the second day of the strike.

Cunningham's boyfriend showed up at Universal Gate 1, her former location, and got down on one knee in front of her. "I didn't know what was going on so I was like, 'Get up, your pants are getting dirty.'" One of her staff writers caught on before she did. "I don't know—she reads more romance

novels than I do—she was very on alert for what is happening here, and then as soon as he reached in his pocket, she started screaming, so then I kind of knew what was happening. It was pretty funny.”

From: Alexandra Cunningham

Date: December 16, 2007

Subject: the last picketing day of 2007

it's a monument of sorts, isn't it. i know we all hoped and prayed it wouldn't come to this. that the contract would be settled before the holidays and the place we'd all be seeing each other in the new year would be at work.

instead, unless there's movement over the break, which there might be because all things are possible, and because our leadership are all staying in town over the holidays to wait by the phone and mobilize at even the slightest sign of willingness on the part of the producers, any producers, to come back to the table—we may be seeing each other on the pavement instead.

let's take a moment to acknowledge that if that proves to indeed be the case, that we're all aware that it will suck. but that we are also all equally aware that it will change nothing when it comes to what determines a fair contract—and what it will take for us to get one. no matter how the AMPTP tries to flip the script and redraw the lines—no matter how unhappy people may individually be with patric or david or our negotiating strategy or the perceived impact of picket lines—we will do what we have to do to get the deal we need. we are united in our knowledge of what is necessary. and we must direct our anger and make it work for us.

so if we are indeed still out there in january, let's all give each other permission to be unhappy about it. and let's let that unhappiness strengthen our resolve.

Saladin Patterson, Fox Gate

Saladin Patterson is a *Psych* co-executive producer who came on as strike captain because, as he tells it, he was the only one in the office when the Guild called. But he's glad he took it on.

Like Cunningham, Patterson has found the best way to relate to his team is to share how he's feeling, the downs along with ups. On the line, he likes to keep things lively, especially at the Fox Galaxy gate, which he calls the stepchild gate—since it's out of the way, there's not as much honking or visible support. He's appreciated the theme days for adding some much-needed excitement.

“I really liked the crime writers theme day, where they went to the AMPTP headquarters and served them papers and charged them for their various crimes,” he recalls. He also praised diversity day at Paramount. “That was good be-

cause a lot of us don't see each other that much. There's only one or two black people per show, if that, so that was really good to see writers of color out. This strike really does affect writers of color disproportionately more than other writers. It affects our middle class and their residual base, and writers of color are disproportionately represented in the Writers Guild's middle class.”

Some people criticize the theme days for not taking the strike seriously enough, but he's all for anything that gets people out on the line. “And if that takes having events or themes that are seen as fun, I think it's worth it, because it's easy to get discouraged, especially once the negotiations fell apart. So I'm really in favor of whatever motivates people to keep coming out.”

Patterson and his team had been stationed at Raleigh in Manhattan Beach, then Sony, before ending up at Fox; he says the Fox captains were great at welcoming the new picketers.

He's also been inspired by the people who keep showing up, like “showrunners from *The Simpsons*—you know there are like a hundred writers from *The Simpsons*—showrunners from when I was on *Frasier*. Chris Lloyd, honestly, people who could afford to sit at home if they wanted to, are out here every day,” Patterson says. “That really impresses a lot of people, because it kind of shows you, if they're willing to fight for it, then these are really important issues.”





DEXTER KIM

From: Alexandra Cunningham
Date: December 10, 2007
Subject: picketing

... don't forget this thursday is bring-a-friend day. so start working that phone tree. someone asked this morning, 'what if all you know are writers?;' and that's a conundrum, but rack

your brains. spouses, kids, and parents count. roommates count. sympathetic neighbors count. ralph's employees who might have the day off thursday count. be creative, damn it. we're gonna win this thing. not to give you too much insight into what makes alex tick, and not that it's a contest, but—IN MY MIND IT'S A CONTEST AND WE'RE GOING TO F***ING WIN.

i'm bringing TWO people, and possibly more. beat me. i dare you. make me look bad. i like it. well, i don't like it, but if you did it, i'd find a way to be happy about it.



Alexandra Cunningham

RON TAMMARIELLO

Claire-Dee Lim, Fox (Pico) Gate

Lim, another strike captain at Fox, is also a member picket coordinator, who signs people in at the Pico gate. She models her *Firehouse Dog* sweater; she co-wrote the film “for Fox,” she says, gesturing behind her.

“It’s so iconic,” she says of the location, “and there’s something about coming here and seeing the *American Idol* billboard, it seems representative of the AMPTP.”

The Pico gate gets a lot more action than Galaxy; steady honking makes a street interview challenging. A Prius passes and honks. She jokes that they didn’t count Prius honks because they’re already “conscious.” “But I have to say one time I was out here leafleting, and all the Prius drivers just blew through,” she recalls. “So we were making jokes about, ‘Look, I got my car, I’ve got one issue at a time, and it’s the environment, to hell with all you strikers!’”

The honks are apparently driving the execs crazy, sitting in the new building next to Pico, so that’s been encouraging.

Lim is on the Guild’s Women’s Committee and had been attending house meetings about the impending negotiations for more than a year. So it seemed natural to take on the contract captain role (a precursor to strike captain).

“Because this is my first strike, I just didn’t want to hear it



Claire-Dee Lim

RON TAMMARIELLO

secondhand. I wanted to hear it from the people organizing and putting this together,” she explains. “So I went and signed up, and I found that among my friends they didn’t know what the heck was going on, so okay, then it might as well just be me who’s going to tell you.”

She handpicked her team, which may be why its members show up so consistently on the line. “I think the morale is good,” she says, “and fueled by frustration and anger and rage.”

And sugar. “We got so many food donations when it started. Everyone thought they were going to lose weight, but it turns out there was no weight to be lost—there was weight to be gained when all those hands were diving into the pink boxes.”

Lim recalls that it was particularly pitiful on the day a run was scheduled from Sony to Fox, Motor to Motor, organized by two writers. “When they showed up, I looked over at the line and thought, *None of those people look like they’re going anywhere*,” she says. “And the sign-up sheet for the run was under the Krispy Kreme box.”

She and many of her compatriots have cut themselves off from the pink cardboard temptations because “it’s crack in a box.” As the interview ends, a car pulls up to the curb, stopping in the red zone, and a woman drops off a homemade coffee cake.

When West Meets East Adam Brooks, WGAE strike captain

Because picketers in New York City find themselves confined to fenced-in areas, the collection of sign-bearing writers can tend to resemble less of a strike line than a scrum or cocktail party. Amidst many of these congested groups, every week you can find strike captain/writer-director Adam Brooks in constant motion, rallying the troops while in his off hours preparing for the Valentine’s Day release of his movie, *Definitely, Maybe*.

Brooks became a strike captain after years of involvement with the Guild East, first on the credits committee (after a frustrating arbitration of his own) and then as a Council member helping to organize a slate of candidates elected to Guild office. “You start getting to know people and then get sucked into the whole thing,” he says. “When you first get involved, you feel like you don’t know anything,



but you realize that’s not a reason *not* to get involved. It’s only by getting involved that you start learning.”

This involvement saw Brooks working to select the negotiating committee leading up to the walk-out. Being a strike captain sees him in a constant back and forth with his team members to keep them informed at the pickets or through regular e-mail updates (with attached blogs/articles or videos), clarifying or discussing issues at the heart of the strike. One particularly frigid day

in front of HBO’s Manhattan headquarters, in anticipation of the DGA negotiations, he even shot a video of hyphenate filmmakers, intended to reach out and build a bridge between the two Guilds. One by one he wrangled sometimes gregarious, sometimes reluctant writer-directors in front of the camera to speak to their fellow DGA members, urging solidarity. Peter Hedges let his strike sign speak for him; Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini spoke their message of “unity” in unison. Brooks combed the line, drafting more volunteers.

Brooks interprets a picket line as another membership meeting and takes each opportunity to keep members of his team updated. Certainly one thing that keeps him busy is serving as sounding board and reality check for the rumor mills, which abound at every strike line and in the blogosphere. “This is especially important as rumors and strategy disagreements are often flashpoints that need to be discussed and processed,” he explains. “We all have our reactions to events and want to talk about them in a very honest way. By the time you’re a strike captain, you have a lot of information and can competently talk to people about their concerns. There are [erroneous media reports] that aren’t necessarily helpful for people to be hearing, I’m afraid. But we’ve been remarkably resolved, even though we haven’t been in total agreement on every little thing.”

Brooks attends the weekly captain’s meeting at the Guild where, with the Guild organizers, they work out strategy and logistics for upcoming pickets/actions/events. “I think everyone, East and West, has felt that the one great thing about the strike has been meeting so many writers,” he says, “hanging out with friends and making new ones. For me as a Guild person, it’s been an opportunity to see younger members getting involved. The comedy and variety writers have been so much a part of this, out every day. It’s really good for the future of the Guild. That’s been the dividend of the thing, the collegiality.”

—Rob Feld



DARREN LEVENE

From: Kit Boss
Date: January 17, 2008
Subject: re: DGA deal & Captains' meeting

Ahoy.

Is there anything more frustrating than sitting at Factor's Deli with a table full of writers when news of the DGA deal breaks, and the one guy with an iPhone trying to read aloud the press release off the United Hollywood website has really shitty eyesight and may actually be illiterate?



By now you may have guessed. That guy was me.
 . . . Sadly, Elvis Costello (spotted walking the picket line at Fox on Wednesday) probably will not be at tomorrow's meeting.

However, Patric Verrone, David Young, and John Bowman will be there. As will I, filled with the longing that comes from being just another picketer at NBC on Alameda during the later shifts and not seeing you guys for what feels like weeks. Oh God, stop me before I start singing "Alison."

**Brian Hartt,
 Warner Bros. Gate**

Hartt is another member picket coordinator. The day before a visit to his Warner Bros. gate, 1,350 WGA members turned out in solidarity for the Warner Bros. workers who were laid off by the studio. But this day is pretty quiet, a dozen or so diehards at each of three gates. Moments earlier, Hartt had been handing out leaflets about the laid-off workers and the strike. A WB exec said he couldn't accept the paper, so Hartt offered to read it to him. The man told him he could read whatever he wanted and kept walking. "I said, 'Well, are you going to listen?'" Hartt relates, but the man just kept walking. "I said, 'Hmm, us talking and you not listening. Now does that sound familiar?'"

But Hartt soon comes up with another story that more than makes up for the first. "A gentleman walked up to our table, a WGA member, but he hadn't made a living as a writer for 10 or 15 years. He still had his card, and he wanted to sign in," Hartt remembers. "I said, 'Great, sign in, come walk with us.'" The man couldn't do it. He was now management, playing for the other team. "He said, 'But instead of walking, can you give me one of your red shirts, because I want to put it on and walk into work wearing it.' And his hands were shaking a little bit as he put on the red shirt. He said, 'Enough is enough,' and marched into Warner Bros. Studios. There's a



Melissa Carter

RON TAMMARIELLO

guy who's going into a meeting somewhere with other executives, and he's wearing a Writers Guild shirt." Those kinds of experiences buoy Hartt and his team, made up of writers he's worked with on shows like *Mad TV*, *The Jamie Kennedy Experiment*, and *Mind of Mencia*.

Another good day started out with an IATSE member yelling at Hartt. The two men started out on one side of the street at Gate 7. "He said, 'Why can't you guys get this done, what's your problem, why can't you get back to the table? You're making this thing go longer,'" Hartt recalls. "He was really upset with the Writers Guild and with me, that we were stalling, and we were to blame. The street crossing was about 40 feet, and by the time we got to the other side of the street, he was pounding me, saying, 'Go get 'em!'" So that's how long it really takes us to get our message out to people that we're right and they're wrong."

From: Alexandra Cunningham

Date: December 16, 2007

... obviously i can only speak for myself, but personally i hope you all know i am ready to do everything in my power to bolster any of you through this difficult time. whether that's cooking you dinner, or getting you drunk (NOT ON THE LINE), or asking your questions at strike captain meetings, or finding you other opportunities to help outside of picketing so that you can feel like you're having a more specific impact . . . just let me know, and i will do it. all i ask in return is that you stay resolved. and if you have issues that are making that difficult,

then you owe it to yourself and all of us to come to the membership meeting and air those issues out. so please do it.

... thanks for everything, you guys. i hope you know i'm going to leave everything i have on the field for you in this. no matter what happens, and no matter how long it takes. you are the best.

Melissa Carter, Disney Alameda Gate

An approach to the Disney gate is obstructed by Sam Koehler and his truck. But strike captain Melissa Carter (*Yes, Dear*, the upcoming film *Parental Guidance*) seems unfazed. Sam is a toddler, his truck is of the Tonka variety, and his mother Wendy Mericle (*Eli Stone*) keeps watch nearby. Could this scene be more Disney?

"A lot of people bring their kids here for part of the time," Carter says. "I have a seven-year-old; he knows there are doughnuts on the line, so I'll get him to come out for a few hours. Most of these people are working parents, so it's destined to be that way."

Carter's husband, Matthew Newman, is a writer as well. They live down the street, so after dropping their son off at school, they walk over and hit the line together. "It's sort of like a cocktail party without the alcohol," she says of their gate. "What I found fascinating is people aren't really talking about their careers, what they were doing before the strike, or writing at all. People are talking about how they met their husband, why they decided to adopt their baby, what that process was like, where they live, schools—it's really finding out what people's lives are like."

A family day theme had a huge turnout, naturally. "That was in the early days when we were still making up chants," she recalls. She made up one that the kids recited energetically: MICKEY MOUSE, DON'T TAKE MY HOUSE! "They didn't know what it meant, but the adults seemed to enjoy that one." The chanting has fallen away since then, she says. "Too much energy; we'd rather talk."

From: Alexandra Cunningham

Date: December 10, 2007

... i'll leave you with a pep-talky thinker from Ralph Waldo Emerson . . .

"it is a universal maxim worthy of all acceptance that a man will have that allowance which he takes. take the place and attitude to which you see your unquestionable right, and all men acquiesce."

...and a 'duh'-er from the captain of my varsity lacrosse team many years ago (NEVER ASK HOW MANY).

"that team wants to beat us. we're not going to let them."

...see you tomorrow. tomorrow has bagels.

love, alex **WB**