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Author(s): John Howard Lawson, Dave Davis and Neal Goldberg

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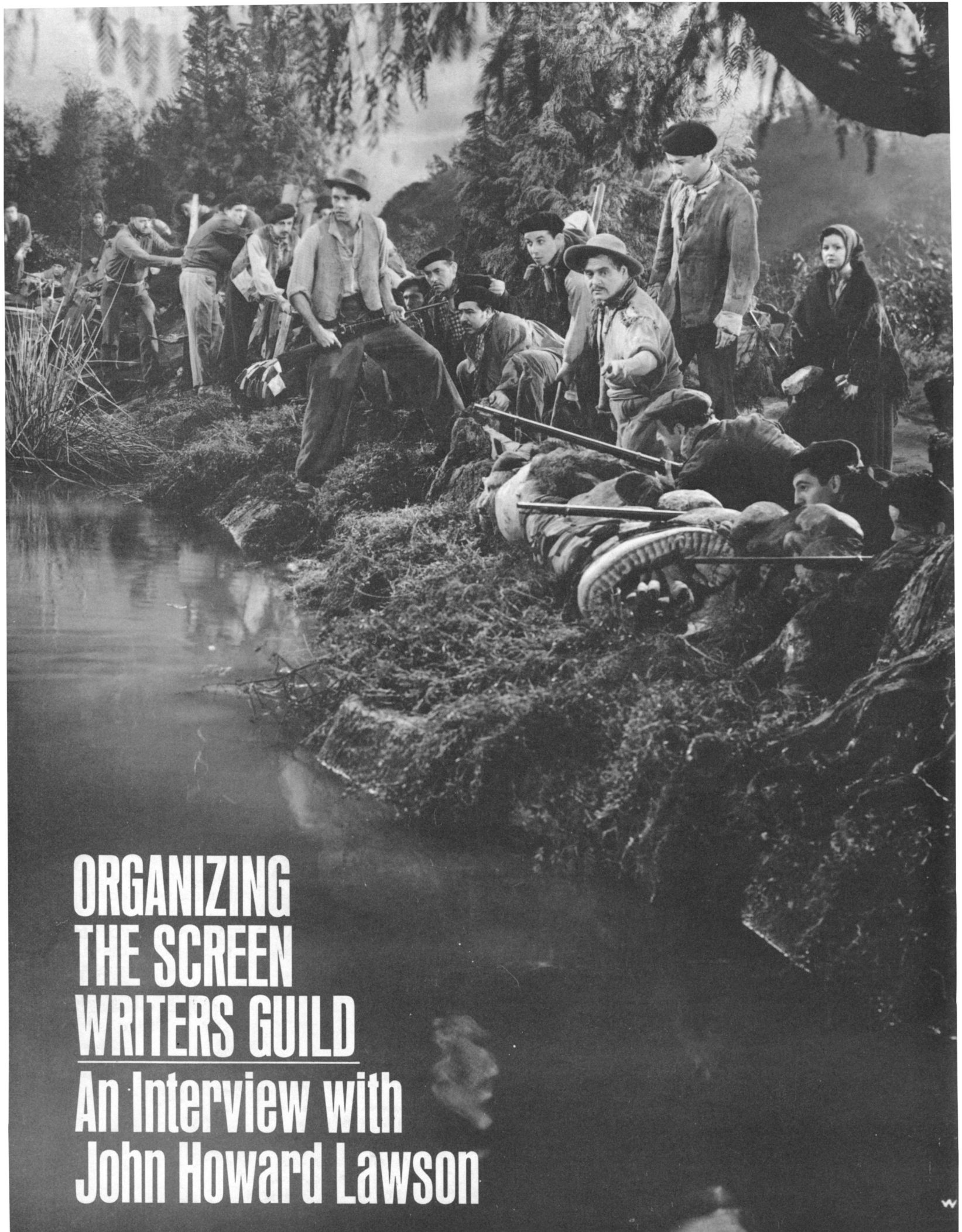
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**ORGANIZING
THE SCREEN
WRITERS GUILD**
**An Interview with
John Howard Lawson**

On August 11, 1977, former screenwriter John Howard Lawson died in Mt. Zion Hospital, San Francisco, at the age of 82. Lawson's reputation rests on his scripts (BLOCKADE, SAHARA, ALGIERS, COUNTER-ATTACK, ACTION IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC), his critical works (*Film: The Creative Process, Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting, Film in the Battle of Ideas*), and plays (*Processional, Success Story*), but he was also a major, dare I say heroic, figure on the Hollywood left who worked long and arduously within the film industry for social change. Although Lawson was a gifted writer (official historians of screenwriting of course neglect him altogether), it is his part in founding the ScreenWriters Guild and his subsequent role in the Hollywood branch of the Communist Party that were in the long run more significant.

It is hardly necessary to recall that little is known about the political history of Hollywood and less about Lawson himself, since students of American film have long pretended it doesn't exist, preferring to churn out identical books on John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock for their own amusement. When interest in the Hollywood left finally revived in the late 60's and early 70's, Lawson was too old and ill to submit to extensive interviews. His death will make it immeasurably more difficult to piece together the story, although he was reportedly at work on an autobiography when he died, which is to be completed by his daughter.

Prior to the founding of the ScreenWriters Guild in 1933, Hollywood writers were treated with contempt. It was not uncommon for 8 or 10 writers to work on one script with screen credit whimsically distributed among the producers' in-laws, golf partners, or bookies. In organizing the Guild, writers hoped to exercise economic leverage against the studios and gain

some measure of control over their own work.

For his efforts, Lawson was blacklisted in 1947, as a member of the Hollywood 10. He was the first "unfriendly" witness to defy the House Un-American Activities Committee, and was dragged from the hearing by Federal officers for insisting that Chairman Parnell Thomas, later jailed himself, accord him the same courtesy Thomas had extended to the long parade of cooperative witnesses who had been encouraged to give lengthy testimonials to their own patriotism and the treason of others. Lawson's defiance of Thomas sent the star-studded Committee for the First Amendment scurrying back to Beverly Hills, but he set an example for those who followed him before HUAC. He served nearly a year in prison for contempt of Congress, and never worked in Hollywood again.

As a critic, Lawson shared Marx's conviction that culture is class culture, an instrument of class domination. Although his adherence to the Party line and liberal use of Party rhetoric blinded him to some of the progressive contradictions in popular culture, he nevertheless wrote perceptively, if harshly, on Hollywood film. A selection of his essays, published in 1953 under the title *Film in the Battle of Ideas*, is a minor classic of its kind.

The following interview (edited here to read as a first-person narrative) was conducted by Dave Davis and Neal Goldberg in 1973 in connection with their research into labor history in Southern California.* It sheds light on the circumstances surrounding the formation of the ScreenWriters Guild, but regrettably—because the interview was only the first of what was hoped would be a series of discussions—it does not touch on the role of the CPUSA in Hollywood, nor on Lawson's role within the Party.

Peter Biskind

My relationship with film goes back to 1920, when I'd just come back from the First World War, where I was in the ambulance service. I was broke and I had a family and, at that time, in 1920 or the first months of 1921, I sold a play to Paramount pictures for \$5,000. That enabled me to go to Europe for two years to write and that resulted in the plays *Roger Bloomer* and *Processional*, which were done in the New York theater in 1923 and 1925. So I had actually had business connections for the sale of material to Hollywood as early as 1920-21.

That first contact didn't result in any further attempts to do work for the industry because during the 1920's I was preoccupied with trying to develop an avant-garde movement in the theater, a movement towards theatricalism and away from stage realism, an attempt to introduce entirely new values into the theater. It corresponded in many ways with what Brecht and Piscator and Meyerhold were doing in Europe. The most important example of this was probably my play *Processional* which was done by the Theater Guild. I then went on to form, along with four other writers, the New Playwrights Theater, which functioned in New York in 1927 and into 1928 at the Cherry Lane Playhouse in Greenwich Village. Although it was important, in my opinion, and made a deep impression on many people, it became apparent that we could not subsist. The conditions under which we operated just didn't allow us to exist as writers or producers or managers.

It was absolutely essential that we find a different way of functioning, especially because I was dead broke at that time and had heavy debts. The New Playwrights Theater could no longer function and there was really nothing else in New York theater that could afford to support an avant-garde—a so-called Workers' or Peoples' theater, which is what we were trying to establish. Just about that time, in late 1928, I received an offer to come out and work for MGM. It was interesting that they should ask me, of all people, because I was associated with a more or less revolutionary or rebellious movement in the theater. But the motion picture companies didn't care about that—they thought they could use me, get something out of me and, at the time, they weren't worried about what my opinions were. As a matter of fact, that was right at the time that Eisenstein was visiting Hollywood and had a job with Paramount in relation to a dramatization of Dreiser's novel, *An American Tragedy*.

So I came out to MGM on a contract for three months with options running for five years. After some waste of time, I began to function very effectively at MGM. I got along very well there with Thalberg, who was the head of the studio then. I stayed there for

about two-and-a-half years, coming out in the fall of 1928 and staying until the middle or end of 1930, during which time the stock market crashed. The whole economy of the country went to pieces but there was still plenty of money circulating and available in Hollywood. I did a number of very bad but very important pictures which made a great deal of money, including *OUR BLUSHING BRIDES* starring Joan Crawford, another one called *THE SEA BAT*, and *DYNAMITE*, Cecil B. De Mille's first talking picture. All of these were among my credits during those first couple of years, so I was really very successful in Hollywood.

By this time, though, I was beginning to feel that, in many ways, art should be connected with social issues. I was willing to accept the conditions under which one worked in Hollywood, but I couldn't help recognizing that these conditions were abominable, that even from the point of view of turning out a satisfactory commercial product, it was very difficult and almost impossible to function effectively under Hollywood conditions. That was true in 1929 and 1930 and I suspect that, from all I know about Hollywood, it's still true today. From the point of view of the bankers and financiers, of course, it makes lots of sense because they make a lot of money out of deals. But from the point of view of turning out an effective and useful commercial product, it makes no sense at all, in my opinion. Of course, that's something that could be debated at great length.

By 1931 I'd put aside a little of my money from Hollywood and I decided to go back to New York where the conditions were more favorable for my plays than they had been earlier, because the Depression had intervened and plays with some social content were beginning to be in demand. This was just at the time when the roots of the Group Theater were being formed by Clurman and Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford. I knew them and was acquainted with their efforts. It was a period when it looked as if there would be opportunities in the theater, but to go back to New York I had to free myself from my contract with MGM. The only way I could free myself from it was to break it, so I went to Irving Thalberg and told him that I wanted to break my contract and go back to New York because I had some plays that I wanted done. Well, Thalberg, being a suspicious man by nature and having experience

*An outgrowth of their research was *STRIKE THE SET*, a 30 minute b/w documentary on the history of labor organization in Hollywood, with rare footage of the Hollywood strikes of 1946 and an interview with Herb Sorrell, head of the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU). For information on rental of the film, write Dave Davis at Focal Point Films, 209½ Colorado, Santa Monica, CA 90401.

with the difficulties of writers, immediately assumed that the plays I wanted to go back and produce in New York were plays I had written on MGM's time. Actually, they had not been written while I was at MGM; they were plays I had written before I left New York in 1928. There was no way of assuring him of that or even of discussing the matter, especially because the fact that I wanted to leave the studio at all was very upsetting to him.

So I left MGM in 1930 and went back to New York. My wife and I had two children by this time and we were determined not to return to Hollywood, but to establish ourselves in the East. We wanted very much to be out in the country, so we bought a house out near the Sound on Long Island. There was a lot of work to be done on it but we were very happy with it. Pretty soon, however, the expenses of running the house on Long Island were so great that I had to go back to Hollywood to pay for it. I found, as did many other people, many other artists in other fields, that it's not so simple to make a compromise about commercial undertakings—in fact, it's almost impossible.

I had marvelous credits from my period at MGM, credits that were worth dollars in the bank. I was able to make a very unusual, very unsatisfactory arrangement with RKO in 1931 which allowed me to write three original film plays in New York, not at the studio, and just come out to the studio for two weeks consultation on each of the film plays. This was a very unusual arrangement at that time and it worked very badly because that was the year the Depression began to affect Hollywood. RKO in particular was in a state approaching bankruptcy and there were frequent changes in the leadership of the studio and the idea that you could turn out a script and throw it into that malestrom and have it come out as a picture was perfectly absurd. They were very enthusiastic about some of the things I wrote and some of them were produced, but by the end of 1931 David Selznick had become the head of RKO—for a few months, not for very long—and he was working on his own projects and had no use for the scripts I had written. He did employ me for another four to six weeks but then my period at RKO ended and I looked in vain for another job in Hollywood. The tremendous successes I had made at MGM had been dissipated by my failures at RKO, and apparently there was just no place for me to function. My family and I remained in Hollywood anyway because we didn't have enough money to sustain a permanent program of living in the East.

Soon afterwards I had two plays produced—one in New York and one on the road. The one in New York was *Success Story*, which was a very remarkable play and it attracted a great deal of attention. It just so happened that Cecil B. De Mille, with whom I had worked on his first talking picture, wrote me a letter saying that he had seen *Success Story* and thought it was tremendous, that it was the only good play in New York. He especially admired the dialogue which was so life-like, he said, that it was absolutely astounding in the New York theater. Well, I passed this letter on to my agent and it immediately resulted in an offer to work at MGM again. Thalberg was very ready to forget the conditions under which I had left the studio if I was willing to come back, and especially if I wrote such wonderful dialogue, as Cecil B. De Mille said I did—De Mille was then still at MGM. So I came back and was assigned to work on a story about a General Hospital.

I was back working at MGM at a reduced salary, but very happy to get the money. At the same time, however, I was very disgusted with the conditions in Hollywood. Then came the election of Roosevelt and its impact on the whole social situation in the country—his inauguration, the closing of the banks, and the stopping of all money transactions in the United States. This was not a move which presaged a revolution, by any means; it was a practical measure to stabilize the banking system and to avoid failures of banks. But it was used by the studios as the occasion to cut the salaries of all creative personnel by one-half. At MGM and the other studios, meetings were held of all the creative personnel—all the actors, writers, technicians and directors—and at these meetings the 50% cut was explained. Louis B. Mayer presided over that meeting. I was sitting not very far from him and I saw that as

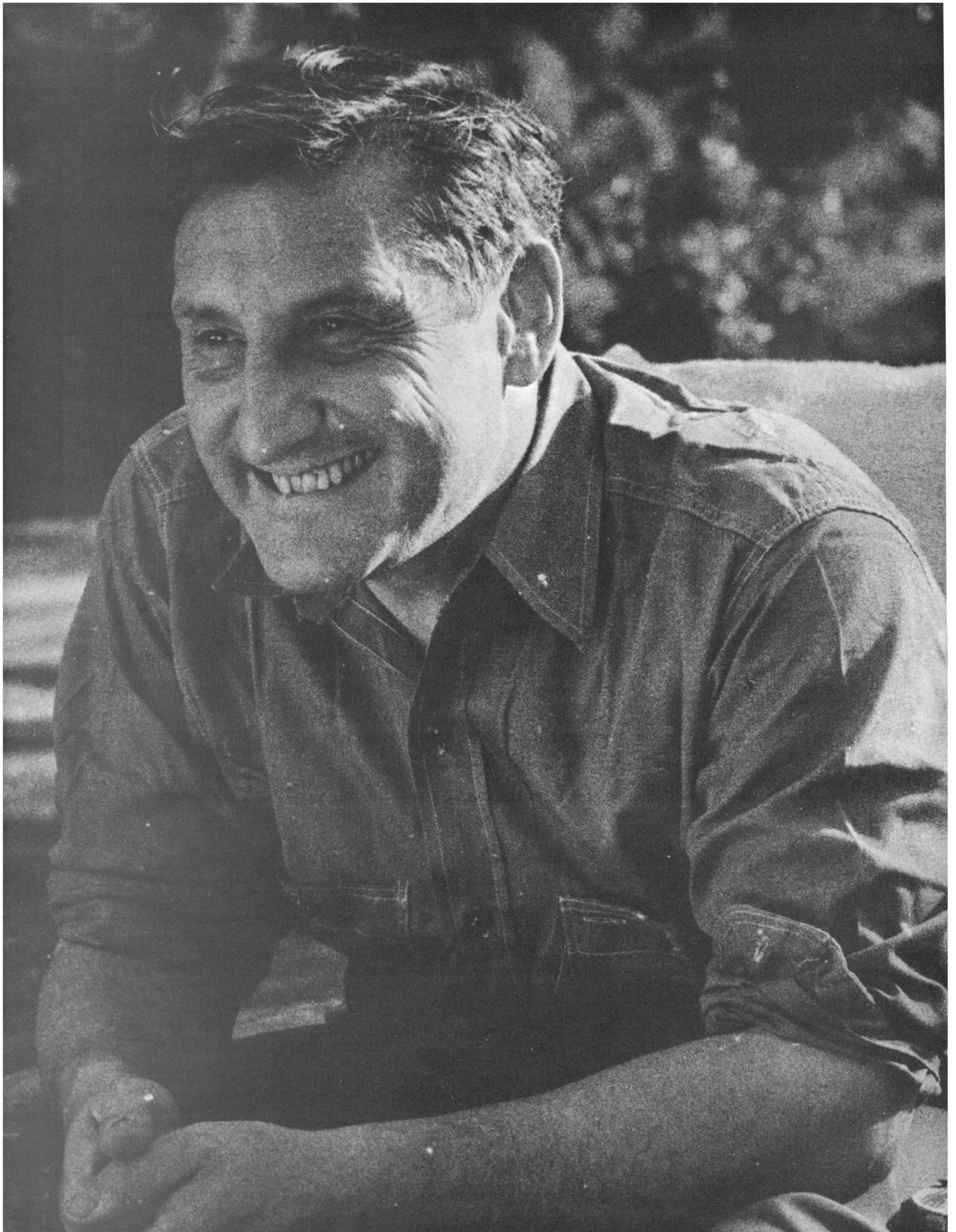
he talked about the cut in salaries—his salary was being cut one-half, too, he said—tears streamed down his face as he explained what a sacrifice it was. Well, I and most of my friends among the actors, writers and others did not think it was such a sacrifice for MGM. We knew very well that they were making profits and would go right on making profits, and that Louis B. Mayer was retaining his enormous assets in terms of stock in MGM. About that time I had begun to hold meetings regarding a writers' guild or union. When the 50% cut came, it seemed obvious that the writers in Hollywood—several hundred of them, many of them unemployed, and others being cut one-half regardless of the terms of their contract—that the time had come when it was possible to really organize a union, although writers were afraid of the word union, so we called it the Screen Writers Guild.

I was very active in the preparations for the first open meeting of the Guild. At the time of the first open meeting—I think in March or April of 1933, shortly after Roosevelt's inauguration—nobody in Hollywood knew anything about the Guild. But the word had gotten around to writers, and there was a turnout of several hundred writers that night. I had taken such a leading role in the preparations, and in the study of the legal questions in regard to the organization of the guild, that it was unanimously agreed by the steering committee that I should make the main report, and that I should be elected without opposition as President of the new guild, which I was very proud to do.

I was interested in a Screen Writers Guild for two reasons: in the first place, from an economic point of view; and in the second place, to make better pictures, to make some sense of the production of pictures within the industry. Now I didn't labor under the delusion that the writer could control his material, which is supposedly the situation in the theater, although in the theater, too, there are all sorts of factors which determine what the writer can do with a play which is in production and under all the pressures of production. But I did think that writers should have more participation in production, that they should be part of a team which would include the director and the producers of the picture. The producer, the director and the writer, in my opinion, should work together in a collaborative effort to make a motion picture. Whether this was practical or not, I would wonder now, but anyway this was very important to us at that time, the whole question of the treatment of writers. Not only their physical treatment, their physical inability to function effectively as writers but also the custom of having four or five writers or ten or twelve writers work on the same story, and the confusion about credits. During the time I'd been at MGM I got some very big credits, and I got some fairly good credits at RKO afterwards, but the credits did not correspond in any way to the actual work I had done on those pictures, because friends of the producers were put in for subordinate credits, and the credits were juggled in all sorts of ways.

So I was very much concerned with the writer's role in relation to the industry, and I still am. When I made the opening speech at the writers meeting—I think it was held in the Knickerbocker Hotel in Hollywood—I opened with the words: "The *writer* is the creator of motion pictures." I think people have failed to recognize the significance of those words which foreshadowed by many years the development of the *auteur* theory which developed in France and which identified the director as the creator of the motion picture. Nowadays I wouldn't know whether it's the director or the writer, but I would be very doubtful if the writer is the creator unless he and the director are the same person, or so close that they can really work together in some sort of effective artistic collaboration.

In any case, those words were sufficient to insure the eternal enmity of producers against the writers. I say eternal because it still exists—there's a strike of writers going on right now as we sit and talk. You see, the producers regarded the Screen Writers Guild not only as an economic threat that would negotiate and get higher pay for writers, but also as a deadly threat to the whole system of making films and to their authority and power over the



material. In the months and years that followed, this became a major issue. This is important to mention because it's almost always ignored in accounts of the history of Hollywood. I don't think you can possibly understand the situation that developed around the Hollywood Ten and why the attack was made at that particular time in 1947 without this perspective. You cannot regard it as an offshoot of a labor dispute that came up suddenly at that time—the case of the Hollywood Ten goes back to the formation of the Screen Writers Guild in 1933, and I am very proud of the fact that I was a leading figure in organizing the Guild. It was a dedication that I felt deeply toward the writer, toward the freedom of the writer within the limits imposed by the industry, toward enlarging those limits so that the writer could do a more effective creative job. I felt this very strongly, although my ideas about how and to what extent it could be done have varied through the years and would be quite different today. But I regard that meeting at the Knickerbocker Hotel in 1933 as really the beginning of a cycle of my life, a determination, a commitment to give my life and my professional activity to this cause. It was the logical beginning of the events that came to a crisis in 1947 and that sent me to jail in 1950 and 1951. These issues are still at work today and they're still ignored.

During the Depression, with the development of organization, including trade union organization and people's organization, it became very important for the leading power in the United States—what is loosely called the 'Establishment'—to control the means of communication. The means of communication were far more important in 1933 and 1934 than they had been in 1925 and 1926, because the whole situation in the country had changed. There was no threat of revolution, that would be perfectly absurd to say, but there was a threat of social change—the social changes that were being conducted with a great deal of liberal skill by Franklin D. Roosevelt.

When I was elected President of the Screen Writers Guild, I had a contract with MGM, so they kept me for the length of my contract. When it expired a few months later, I was fired, of course. I spent most of the year 1933 and early 1934 in Washington trying to get recognition of the Screen Writers Guild under the National Industrial Recovery Act, which was one of the great pillars of Roosevelt's legislation that been adopted by Congress at that time. Being in Washington, totally frustrated in the effort to get recognition for the Screen Writers Guild, I learned a great deal about the Establishment and about Washington politics. The process of radicalization—which began for me at dawn on the battlefield in France when I was driving ambulances near Hill 301—that process of education in the meaning of the social structure of capitalism in the United States was continued and given a decisive turn by my function as the head of the Screen Writers Guild. I learned there was no compromise you could make with the Establishment. I learned that it was simply a dream—later, of course, the dream was realized—but it was simply a dream in 1933 to suppose that the Roosevelt Administration was going to support the demands of writers against the demands of the rulers of the industry, when the Administration and the whole government depended on the industry to popularize its activities and to support it.

However, there were interesting issues which arose during that campaign. We did win certain concessions as a result of the campaign I led in Washington, but the producers were very well able to undermine all the concessions. There were also a great many internal difficulties between the Screen Writers Guild and the Dramatists Guild and the Authors Guild, the other guilds of the Authors League of America, which had offered us a home. I had two more plays slated for production in the early spring of 1934, and I had to decide whether I wanted to go on as President of the Screen Writers Guild. I was very popular. One of the reasons I had been elected President of the Guild was that even at that time there was a left-wing and a right-wing in Hollywood, but I was almost the only person who was totally trusted by all groups within the Guild. They all felt that they could rely on me, that I would serve only the interests of the writer and be perfectly honest with

everybody. I think that characterization would still hold good, and I think there are people in Hollywood who would accept that characterization. It is no longer the general opinion of people in Hollywood, though—they consider me violently prejudiced in favor of an extremely radical position.

Be that as it may, I decided in 1934 that I could not run for reelection as President of the Guild, although I wanted to be on the board and participate very actively in its activities. So when the election was held in Hollywood—I was living in the East at the time—they accepted my refusal to run for President again, and Ralph J. Block became the second President of the Guild. He was not elected by acclaim. I am still the only person in the history of the Screen Writers Guild who was elected by a unanimous vote of the membership.

The Guild and I soon entered a very difficult period. It was perfectly plain, not only to me but also to other leaders of the Guild—Ralph Block was succeeded in 1935 by Ernest Pascal—and from talking with Sidney Howard and leading writers from the Dramatists Guild of the Authors League of America, that the only way to make our point and become recognized by the motion picture producers was to form a single organization of writers, *one* organization that could stop the flow of material from all writing sources to the producers. As long as the Screen Writers Guild and the Authors Guild and the Dramatists Guild were all separate organizations, and all going their separate ways, there was no possible way of organizing a sufficient control of material to win a fight against the producers. So we undertook to organize one big union of writers, uniting all the various spheres, for the whole country.

Well, these were fighting words as far as the producers were concerned. When this plan was openly proclaimed, and simultaneous meetings in New York and Los Angeles were announced to establish this one organization of writers for the whole country, the producers were determined to break up these meetings and to kill the organization. Again, their attack was directed mainly against me. I had gone to Washington at that time to testify before a copyright committee regarding copyright law, and in the course of my testimony I had said that screen writers in Hollywood were treated like office boys. This was taken as a signal among the—it's a very comic idea—but this was taken as a signal among the more conservative members of the Guild that I was degrading writers and talking about them as office boys. A big movement to censure me and throw me off the board of directors of the Guild was organized and this frightened the members of the board so much that they made a compromise with the reactionaries. They offered to withdraw me in some ways and make an indirect censure of me if the reactionaries would continue to support the program for one big union of writers. This was about May or June of 1936.

It turned out this was all a trick to destroy the Guild. The reactionaries in the Guild were very well organized. They did participate up to a certain point in the decisions to reorganize the Guild as part of one big union of writers, but then at a certain point they all got up and walked out and said they were through with the Guild. The next morning the blacklist was initiated for the first time in Hollywood—that was in 1936, not in 1947 or 1950—because the producers had decided they could kill the Guild completely. I had warned the Guild that if they made any concessions to the attack on me, it wouldn't be myself who would suffer from it, it would be all the writers, because the Guild would be broken if we gave them that opportunity. Of course, this proved correct very rapidly—much more rapidly than I had anticipated or feared.

What happened to me personally was that I was definitely blacklisted in the industry, as were many other people, too, because of their known record as supporters and activists in the Screen Writers Guild. The Screen Writers Guild went completely underground; nobody could admit that they carried a card in the Screen Writers Guild. The blacklist was very loosely organized, however, because nobody was very worried as far as the producers were concerned. Zanuck was really the leader of the producers in suppressing the Guild, and he was very open and very frank about



Henry Fonda and Madeleine Carroll in **BLOCKADE**

it. There were a great many full-page advertisements, many of them very insulting, in *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter* stating the positions of writers, pro and con, on the Guild. But as far as the blacklist was concerned, it really worked more or less automatically and it wasn't anything where there was a definite person or group of people to whom you applied to clear yourself or anything of that sort, as it was later. My friend Francis Faragoh, who was very successful in the industry at that time and who was Vice President of the Guild at the time it was broken up, was convinced that his fate in Hollywood was determined by his connection with the Guild and that the blacklist operated against him and against a great many other people with whom he was associated. In any case, that struggle in 1936 and 1937 marked the first stage in the rather naive effort to create a Screen Writers Guild in Hollywood.

Meanwhile, the creation of the Screen Writers Guild was responsible for the parallel and almost immediate creation of the Actors Guild, which was founded in 1933 just a few weeks after we founded the Screen Writers Guild. The Actors Guild was founded very largely with my advice and under my guidance. I sat with the committee and we talked over all the arrangements; their basic contract, and their agreement with their members, were really modeled directly on the arrangement of the Writers Guild. The Actors Guild had one thing in their favor, though. The Actors Guild was not feared in relation to the control of material, because the only people who were a threat were the very powerful stars who were in a position to dictate what was written, but even these powerful stars were not independent enough or important enough to constitute any real threat to the power of the producers. At the same time, the actors had an advantage in that they were essential immediately to production. If actors walked off the set, that meant

a loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars that very day, whereas the connection of writers with production was much more remote, and much less immediate in terms of a threat.

So this was the first stage in the history of the organization of the writers and actors. The actors had been denied any recognition at that time, and the writers not only had no recognition but they no longer had a guild. In place of the Writers Guild, a new organization under the direction of the producers was set up. It was called the Screen Playwrights, or something of that sort, but it was simply a company union.

"BLOCKADE"

I came back to Hollywood, however, in the middle of 1937. I came back due to the courage, really, of one man, Walter Wanger, who was an independent producer desperate for material. He had established a friendly relation with Harold Clurman, formerly of the Group Theater. Clurman was working as general editor for Walter Wanger, and Wanger had a problem with a story that had been written by Lewis Milestone and Clifford Odets. The story was unsatisfactory, it hadn't worked out, and Wanger didn't know what to do with it. Clurman suggested that he call me—I was back in the East at that time at our house on Long Island, which we were still trying desperately to support—and Wanger telephoned and asked if I'd come right out to Hollywood, and I said I would.

I came out very shortly and we entered into discussions about this film. At that time it was based on a story by Ilya Ehrenburg about Russian expatriates who had refused to return to Moscow at the time of the revolution and who were living in Paris. It was about the problems of these Russians, whether they should return to the Soviet Union and take part in the activities of their own

people. Milestone had read this story and persuaded Wanger to buy it. Milestone and Odets then worked on the story on the basis that it would be changed to a story about Spaniards living in Paris who were initially sympathetic to the Franco regime, and their discovery, their great enlightenment, to the point where they decided they must go back and take a gun in their hands, even if there were no ammunition, in order to defend the democracy and the people of Spain.

Well, practically the whole story took place in France. When I went in to see Wanger, I said, "I have a really startling idea for you—why don't you have the story take place in Spain?" So, he said, "How do you do that?" And I elaborated the idea of a small town in the part of Spain still held by Franco, a small seaport town completely surrounded by the Franco forces, with the people dying of starvation, waiting for a Russian ship which was bringing supplies. The ship then appears through the mist of an early morning outside the harbor and just as it's about to reach the dock, it's torpedoed and sinks at the dock, and all the supplies are lost. That was the skeleton outline I submitted to Wanger of what I hoped would be a real documentary about the Spanish struggle, and he enthusiastically accepted it. That's why the picture was called **BLOCKADE**. In the making of the film, however, there were many questions. It was agreed beforehand, of course—there was no question of the fact that we had certain limitations—that we could not call the Loyalists by name, we could not use the actual Loyalist uniform. This I accepted because it was the only way in which the picture could be undertaken. There was complete understanding between Wanger and myself and there was no attempt on my part to introduce material without discussing it, because I would consider that dishonest and would never attempt to do that with a film I was making.

The problem of **BLOCKADE** was not only the question of how far you could go with it politically. It seemed to me that a great film could be made simply on the question of democracy in Spain, because this to me was the basis of the struggle of the Spanish people. There was also the point that Franco and Hitler and Mussolini were using Spain as a means of preparing for World War II, and if the people of Spain were defeated, World War II would follow. This we agreed upon and this was the basis of the story. But there were lots of problems—esthetic problems, creative problems—that I was not able to solve. I'm proud of the fact that **BLOCKADE** did play a part in the struggle around the awakening to the meaning of Spain. I'm proud of the fact that it was the only commercial film that was made that did attempt to take the Loyalist side and to explain the Loyalist point of view in the Spanish struggle. But as for the aesthetics of the picture, it is not a fine picture in many ways. I wouldn't say it's a bad picture, because it's touched by the greatness of the subject. There are moments in **BLOCKADE**, however, when you can see a definite conflict between the documentary aspect—the faces of the Spanish people, peasants, city people in the little town, the people on the hill watching for the boat from the Soviet Union to come in—and the second-hand spy story which is the central story of **BLOCKADE**. You just cannot fit them together. That is my fault, no one else's fault but mine. I never could find a way of dealing with this material that would give it its full weight and strength in relation to the tremendous historic issues that were raised.

There's a very interesting story about **BLOCKADE**. It was planned to have a gala opening at Grauman's Chinese Theatre and, at the last minute, Wanger was forced to call it off. He was forced—and he told us this himself—he was forced to send copies of the script not only to Washington but also to Paris and London for advice as to changes that would be made. When the changes were made, the picture had a much more modest opening at Westwood in Los Angeles. So there was enormous pressure on the picture. There was so much pressure, in fact, that William Dieterle and I—he was the director of **BLOCKADE**, as you know—William Dieterle and I felt it while working on another film for Wanger. It was to be the first film to deal with the struggle against the Nazis, the underground struggle in Hitler Germany. That film was all ready to go—it was cast, the scenery was built,

and it was ready to start on a Monday morning. On Saturday of that week, Wanger called in Dieterle and myself and he said, "I'm, sorry, but I've been told that I'll never get another penny of banking money in Los Angeles or anywhere else in the United States if I make this film. So all I can tell you is that it's off. Sorry, but there's nothing I can do about it."

THE GUILD GETS ITS CONTRACT

Meanwhile, tremendous changes were being made in the situation in Hollywood, because the actors and the writers had grown in strength. Roosevelt had adopted a much more radical program than that with which he started. Roosevelt was also interested in the Hollywood situation from the point of view of preventing film production from falling into the hands of total reactionaries. From a liberal point of view, Roosevelt had become quite interested in the plight of the writer. He didn't like actors, he was always prejudiced against actors and thought they were bad people. There's a very interesting letter I have somewhere in which Roosevelt explains his attitude toward actors as opposed to the really serious people, the creators of film, who he thinks are writers.

By this time there was the National Industrial Relations Act, with its clause 7.A, which guaranteed collective bargaining. So, under the Labor Relations Act, we were able to force the issue of collective bargaining. A labor election was finally held between 1939 and 1940, as I recall, and the Screen Playwrights, the company union controlled by the producers, was overwhelmingly defeated and the Screen Writers Guild was made the sole bargaining representative for the writers. I was reinstated by having worked with Wanger and because the producers and the Administration took a different attitude toward trade union organization from that they had taken in 1936. I was able to be on the committee that negotiated the contract for the writers and in 1941, I believe it was, a contract was finally agreed upon and signed. I was present during that whole procedure as one of the representatives of the writers.

However, there was a great deal of pressure mounting. Reactionaries and representatives of American fascism of various shades and kinds were beginning to work very actively in Hollywood because the question was being faced increasingly as to who would actually control communication. This is the question that the Hollywood strike in 1946 and 1947 was really about, and this same question went back to the very founding of the Screen Writers Guild.

That question was very obviously raised in regard to my film **BLOCKADE**. **BLOCKADE** appeared just at the time when the so-called consent decree about the trustification of the industry was signed by the producers, with the producers agreeing to divest themselves of certain properties in exhibition in order to avoid an all-out anti-trust suit. The anti-trust suit was tabled and certain agreements were made in regard to it. That happened just at the time of the production of **BLOCKADE**. One of the people who was most active in attacking the film industry as being a trustified industry, and demanding that trustification be stopped by the government, was Walter Wanger, because he was one of the independents who was most affected by the increasingly tight concentration of capital in the industry—a concentration of capital which in other forms goes on today.

By 1941, when the Screen Writers Guild was organized and recognized by the producers, and the Screen Actors Guild had been recognized, and other guilds had also been recognized, by that time it was apparent that there would be a major struggle around the strength and position of the guilds. The Screen Writers Guild had to be controlled by the producers in such a way that it could not go beyond the limits of purely economic questions. The political attack on the Writers Guild and other guilds in Hollywood, the attempt to take over the guilds in the sense that they should be prevented from having any larger perspective or larger point of view, began in 1940 and 1941. This was when the Dies Committee was first formed. The Federal Theater was

destroyed at this time—that was the first function of the Dies Committee. It was also at this time that a man named Jack Tenney became President of the musicians union on a very radical program. But the minute he became President—with the help of the writers and the actors, incidentally—he immediately turned reactionary. He became chairman of a committee of the California legislature investigating Communism in Hollywood, particularly in the motion picture industry. So in 1943 and 1944, Jack Tenney was operating, having hearings. I was called to those hearings and forced to give certain testimony although I refused to give other testimony that they tried to wangle out of me. Both the national Dies Committee and the local Tenney Committee were working overtime to prove that there was a huge Communist conspiracy in Hollywood.

It's important to note, in this connection, that at this time the writers began to extend their interests beyond just purely economic questions. One tremendous event which occurred at this time was our participation with the University of California in Los Angeles in holding the first Writers Congress. It was held right in the middle of the war, in 1943, and it opened with a message from the Commander-in-Chief, from Roosevelt himself, saying that this was one of the most important events that had taken place in the United States. Despite this, the Writers Congress was violently attacked in Los Angeles by Jack Tenney and it was violently attacked in Washington and by the Hearst press. It was considered a plot by Communists to take over the industry.

Out of that first Writers Congress, however, came the first collaboration between working people in the media—film, radio and, later, television—with academic people. I can say with pride and without any hesitation that I was largely responsible for this first collaboration. We decided to publish a magazine, *The*

Hollywood Quarterly, which first came out in 1945, I think. I was one of the editors and largely active in determining policy. We wanted to make it a genuinely active academic magazine, which at the same time would go into the problems of the industry, which would try to make the making of pictures a more creative process, and which would be supported by the guilds. There are many reasons that couldn't be accomplished, but one of the main reasons was that by 1946 it was no longer possible for me to be an editor of *The Hollywood Quarterly*. I recall the day when I was called into the office of Clarence Dykstra, who was Provost of the university at that time, and with great regret and with apologies, he told me that he had been told that he had to either drop *The Hollywood Quarterly*, to sever all relations between it and the university, or else I had to resign as one of the editors. "Well," I said, "I don't want to hurt the magazine, so I'll resign." *The Hollywood Quarterly* was later changed to *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*, and then it was changed to *Film Quarterly*, which is still being published. It is the direct descendant of the magazine that I helped initiate in 1945.

Today, of course, there has been a proliferation of communications departments, of the study of communications and the inter-relationship of the media. It is exemplified particularly in the California Institute of the Arts which was established with the money of Walt Disney. I remember reading an article on the founding of the Institute by Corrigan—he was the head of the Institute for a long time until he was forced out—in which he said, 'This is a revolution in the arts. This is the first attempt to have a genuinely free institute of the arts.' Well, how can you have a free institute of the arts when it's got that kind of money behind it? When its function is obviously to keep people quiet and not to help

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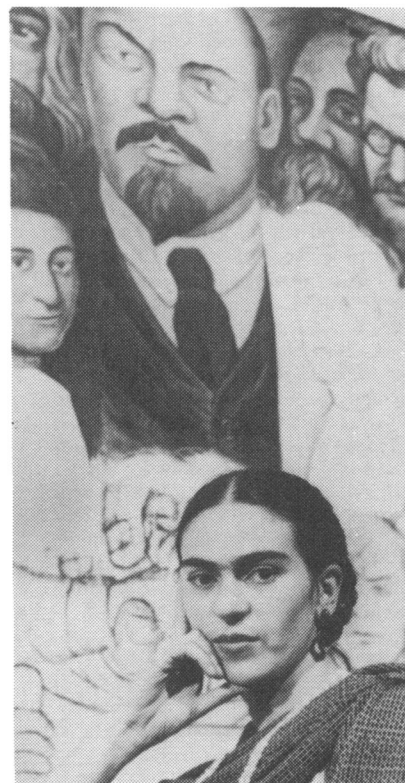
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THE SCREEN WRITERS GUILD (Contd.)

them express themselves? For that matter, what happens to the film industry, what happens to independent production, when you have all this business intervention today? Paramount is connected with Gulf Oil, Warner Brothers is connected with Kinney Shoes—I mean, how can you talk about the independence of the industry, or the independence of any individual, however well intentioned, working within the industry, when all this is going on?

These questions deserve a great deal further study. And all this history is essential to understanding what happened on a certain morning when subpoenas were delivered to about 25 Hollywood people who went to Washington and became the Hollywood Ten. This is the reason why the Hollywood strike in 1945, 1946 and 1947 was broken so brutally and with so much violence. It all fits into a certain pattern, and unless that pattern is observed, it's very difficult to understand the trade union situation in Hollywood today, it's very difficult to understand how the content of pictures relates directly to the process of unionization. ■

*A strike was begun in Hollywood in March, 1945, under the leadership of the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU), a confederation of various craft unions—painters, set decorators, machinists, electricians, etc.—which was attempting to organize a new, democratically-run industrial union to replace the old AF of L unions which, under the domination of Roy Brewer's International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), were politically reactionary and rife with corruption. In October of that year, mass picket lines outside the Warner Bros. studio were attacked by strike-breakers and goons armed with baseball bats and tire irons, with assistance from the Burbank police who used high-pressure fire hoses and tear gas against the strikers.

The CSU strike was eventually defeated, and the CSU itself destroyed, by an alliance between Brewer's IATSE and the studios. The whole affair was characterized by intense red-baiting and ended in a series of law suits, conspiracy arrests and a congressional investigation.