

SAG-AFTRA video game performers on strike

Marc Wells

22 October 2016

In the early morning of Friday, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) announced a strike against a dozen video game entertainment corporations, including Electronic Arts Productions, Inc., Disney Character Voices, Inc. and Warner Brothers Games, Inc. The strike was voted by 96.55 percent of the union's membership back in October 2015 and applies to production commenced on or after February 17, 2015.

Nearly two years of negotiations failed to produce a new Interactive Media Agreement between the union and the employers. The last contract was signed in the mid-1990s, at a time when video game technology was in its infancy and actors' performances were a marginal factor.

Technological advances since then have rendered that agreement obsolete and allowed the corporations to reap immense benefits from uncovered areas, as is often the case with new technology implementation. Moreover, today's video games are comparable to tele-cinematic production, where actors' performances are more similar to film and television standards.

The thrust of the negotiations has revolved around secondary compensation, safety and transparency. The intransigence of the companies is certainly glaring, but just as striking is the pitiful character of the demands put forth by SAG-AFTRA and the timid implementation, after one full year, of strike action.

Residual income is a long-established method of compensation among artists, a modest form of profit sharing. In traditional royalty-based production (film, TV, music), artists are paid additional income if the medium reaches certain sales thresholds. The union's request amounts to a measly additional scale payment for every 2 million copies, or downloads sold, or 2

million unique subscribers to online-only games, with a cap at 8 million units/subscribers. Currently, that amounts to \$3,300.

With regard to safety, video game production often requires strenuous vocal and physical performances. There are many reported incidents of actors fainting, vomiting or losing their voice for days or weeks, sometimes with permanent damage to the vocal cords. The union is demanding a limit of 2 hours to vocally stressful sessions, instead of 4 hours previously.

Moreover, with several incidents being reported, stunt coordinators can effectively prevent painful injuries on the set. The union is requesting a provision to include such service.

On the question of transparency, SAG-AFTRA is merely requesting that actors be informed of the project title and role they are being hired for before signing a contract. In film and TV this is normal procedure. In video games, however, actors may be hired unknowingly for roles they may not be willing to perform, such as sex scenes or offensive content.

SAG-AFTRA's demands are so mild that even their web site admits that their proposed package is "not loaded with any crazy demands." Especially when analyzing the profits realized by these companies. As of 2015, the video game industry in the United States has generated an estimated \$16.5 billion in content sales, a 7 percent jump from the previous year and more than three times the numbers in 2000. Last year, total revenues (content, hardware and accessories) for the industry in the US hit \$23.5 billion—a 5 percent increase over 2014, according to the Entertainment Software Association.

Yet, the giant corporations are determined to repeal earlier concessions or simply not apply provisions in new agreements that would be mildly favorable to

performing artists. This process is no different from what occurs in the auto industry, for example, where companies have been able to increase and pocket handsome profits by halving workers' wages and attacking their health and pension benefits.

SAG-AFTRA represents 160,000 performing artists in an industry driven by multi-billion-dollar corporations that differ little from financial institutions. The union cannot ensure work for its members, nor is it able to defend past gains. It has come a long way from the militant days of the 1930s, when its predecessor organizations fought and won bitter struggles under the leadership and political influence of socialists.

The current situation is not simply the product of exceptional greed, although there is no shortage of it in the top executive layers and boardrooms of entertainment giants. Rather, it's the consequence of the historic crisis of world capitalism and obsolescence of the nation-state, through which, in earlier times, militant unions were able to obtain some economic gains.

Unions' power have been drastically diminished by globalization and the ability of capital to scour the world for cheaper labor. SAG-AFTRA, like its parent organization, the AFL-CIO, fully supports capitalist relations and instructs its members to subordinate to the terms of the profit system. Moreover, its nationalist views, as displayed in its mission statement, pit American artists against their brothers and sisters worldwide.

Actors and performing artists should review the recent history of their own category as well: in 2009, SAG (at the time not yet merged with AFTRA) proposed an agreement that set the stage for the current struggle. The corporations' determination to avoid paying residuals was then one of the major points of contention, and that agreement opened the door to future setbacks.

Today, the struggle is occurring in the context of a world economic and political crisis, with diminishing living standards—especially at the hand of the Obama administration, which supervised the largest wealth redistribution in history from the bottom to the top—and the danger of a world war. To think that capitalism, a failed system, can offer actors, or any other section of the working class, a future, is simply an exercise in deceit.

In a context where less than 25 percent of the games released employ union actors, the current situation risks snowballing into a horrible race to the bottom. The majority of the criticism toward entertainment unions is typically from the right, accusing them of making actors and performers too expensive and pushing work toward cheaper states or abroad. This is a lie. Such conditions are not created by the union, but by the crisis of capitalism.

On the other hand, however, workers in the entertainment industry will be unable to pursue a way forward through the traditional trade-unionist channel of contract bargaining. If so, they will suffer a defeat. Corporations, their armies of lawyers and the union itself will use free market rules to coerce actors to accept an unacceptable agreement.

There's also the short-term and shortsighted illusion of Fi-Core (Financial Core) promoted by hard-right figures like Jon Voight, a provision that allows artists to accept union as well as non-union jobs. This option works for well-established actors, writers and directors (George Clooney, George Lucas, Quentin Tarantino have opted for Fi-Core), as their agents can negotiate any fee. For the vast majority, this is the equivalent of losing all pension and health care benefits.

There's no good reason why entertainment giants continue to be owned by a parasitic layer of Hollywood executives and stockholders who have nothing to contribute to culture and art. Artists, technicians and similar professionals must place these companies under public ownership and democratic control.

The way forward for actors and artists to defend and improve living standards, to create decent jobs, to elevate the general cultural level will require a socialist strategy, one that starts with a turn to the international working class, the only social force capable of reorganizing social resources to satisfy human needs instead of profit.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact