

# Video game workers spread strike against Activision Blizzard

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A group of approximately 200 employees of Activision Blizzard King (ABK) went on strike last Thursday as part of a growing movement by tech workers against the corporations in the global video game industry.

An organization called ABK Workers Alliance announced the strike on Twitter and issued a series of demands, saying the job action would be “open-ended” until “worker representation is finally given a place within the company.”

The group issued another tweet which said, “We encourage our peers in the Game Industry to stand with us in creating lasting change.”

Another tweet on Monday listed the demands of the strikers as, “The reinstatement of all laid off employees. Convert all QA contractors to full time employees. Improve representation. Pay transparency. Unbiased third-party audits.”

The issue of the treatment of QA (quality assurance) employees by Activision Blizzard is one of the top concerns of the employees. QA workers are responsible for testing games and ensuring that they operate smoothly and without errors.

The wider strike action is in part a response by workers to recent QA job cuts carried by the management of Raven Software, a division owned by ABK. The dozen laid off Raven Software workers were performing testing of the lucrative Call of Duty franchise and its latest product called “Warzone” which generates \$2 billion annually for ABK.

A section of Raven Software workers staged a one-day sickout and issued a letter to management, demanding that QA employees be reinstated stating, “Those participating in this demonstration do so with the continued success of the studio at the forefront of their mind.” The letter pointed out that Call of Duty:

Warzone generates \$5.2 million in revenue each day.

A worker participating in the Raven Software job action told Bloomberg that the staff was not given a clear justification for the layoffs. The worker said, “My fellow employees are losing their jobs for arbitrary reasons.”

Activision Blizzard, Inc. is video game holding company based in Santa Monica, California and has a Wall Street value of \$46.4 billion. The conglomerate is the product of a series of two dozen mergers and acquisitions in the global video game market going back to the late-1990s. In addition to the popular Call of Duty products, Activision Blizzard also owns the World of Warcraft, Tony Hawk, Guitar Hero and Crash Bandicoot series.

The acquisition by Activision Publishing of the French-based Vivendi Games in 2006 created the fifth largest video game company in the world behind Sony, Tencent (based in China), Nintendo and Microsoft.

Among the workers who have joined the strike call by ABK Workers Alliance are all QA employees at Treyarch, a division acquired by ABK in 2001 that also works on Call of Duty. This group of workers is refusing to return to work until, “every member of the QA team, including those terminated on Friday, [are] offered full-time positions.”

The organization has set up a GoFundMe campaign to raise money for the strikers and has so far collected over \$100,000. Organizer Jessica Gonzales explains on the fundraising page that ABK CEO Bobby Kotick and the company board of directors have engaged in campaign of intimidation and harassment of employees who have been involved in organizing efforts and speaking out against sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the workplace.

Gonzales states that the company has hired “the law

firm Wilmer Hale, known for union busting, to disrupt and impede the improvement efforts of Activision-Blizzard workers.” They also used tactics such as luring Raven Software workers with promises of promotion, “only to be terminated shortly after relocation on top of the already underappreciated and severely underpaid working conditions of ABK workers across the company.”

The ABK Workers Alliance has called on CEO Kotick and the entire nine-member board of directors to resign. The organization has also established ties with the Communications Workers of America (CWA), a labor union with 700,000 members in various industries and is affiliated with the AFL-CIO. The CWA has been intervening the conflict between the workers and Activision-Blizzard with an organizing drive including the distribution of union authorization cards to the employees.

In September, the CWA filed on behalf of ABK employees an Unfair Labor Practices charge with the US National Labor Relations Board over “coercive tactics” to “prevent employees from exercising their rights” to organize for a work environment that is “free from abuse, discrimination and sexual harassment, and this right is protected by federal labor law.”

The company has responded to the strike movement and the intervention of the CWA by telling workers that the company is working on improving its internal culture and the employees do not need a union to achieve this. Chief Administrative Officer Brian Bulatao sent a company-wide email that said, “Achieving our workplace culture aspirations will best occur through active, transparent dialogue between leaders and employees that we can act upon quickly. That is the better path than simply signing an electronic form offered to you by [the] CWA or awaiting the outcome of a legally mandated and regulated bargaining process sometime in the future.”

The involvement of the CWA and the AFL-CIO in the expanding struggle at ABK is a serious warning that a section of the ruling establishment is seeking to stifle and subordinate the demands of video game workers into the dead end of NLRB filings and the politics of the Democratic Party.

Over many decades, the CWA has sabotaged the strikes in the telecommunications industry by isolating each of them and forcing workers to accept the

destruction of their jobs, wages and benefits in order to protect the financial interests of giant monopolies such as Verizon and AT&T.

The CWA has been so successful in betraying the telecommunications workers that the number of jobs in the industry has fallen by one-third since 2000. Meanwhile, the number of union jobs in the industry has dropped from more than 25 percent in the 1970s to around 10 percent today.

The declining union membership in telecommunications industry is a primary reason that the CWA is now intervening among other sections of workers in the health care, publishing and video game industries. The union bureaucrats who lead the CWA are seeking to both ensure that corporate interests are protected by imposing sellout agreements upon workers and making sure that a steady stream of income is secured through automatic dues collection from workers’ paychecks.

Workers at Activision Blizzard King and throughout the video game industry need to organize and unify in a common fight for job security, improved working conditions and to have a voice at work against all the corporations in the global \$180 billion industry. This struggle, however, can only be carried forward successfully by learning the lessons of the recent strikes at Volvo, Dana and Kellogg’s where workers are facing a joint fight against both the employers and the official unions.

The struggle against the video game corporations requires an international strategy to unify the struggle of developers and QA workers across national boundaries. Furthermore, the defense of basic rights on the job today requires the development of a political program by factory and professional workers against the entire capitalist system and for socialism.



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