

Activision Blizzard workers walk out over vaccine mandate rollback

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On April 4 over 100 workers at video game publishing giant Activision Blizzard (also known as Activision Blizzard King, or ABK) carried out a virtual walkout in protest after an internal email revealed the company intended to walk back a vaccine mandate for employees working in-person. The video game company, which owns the *Call of Duty* series of military shooters, the massively popular multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* and the also popular puzzle phone game *Candy Crush Saga*, announced the policy change just days after the highly infectious and deadly BA.2 variant of COVID-19 became the officially dominant variant in the US.

Workers For A Better ABK (also referred to as the ABK Workers Alliance), the organization behind the walkout, described the drives behind the action in a Twitter statement. Their statement reads, “As our leadership pushes for more employees to return to the office, it is imperative that we consider the needs of our employees’ health and safety and provide permanent work from home solutions for employees.” Their statement raised two demands: 1) make working from home an open and equitable option for all employees, and 2) reverse the lifting of the vaccine mandate for all other studios who have not yet walked it back.

Many workers speaking out on Twitter and other social media platforms stated their support for and solidarity with fellow workers. Ada-Claire Cripps, senior software engineer with Battle.net and online products at Blizzard, noted on Twitter, “Covid is far from over. It’s clear that leadership across the gaming industry does not have health and safety in mind with hasty RTO [Return To Office] plans and reduced safety precautions.”

Another ABK worker, Daniel Duffin, stated, “I fully support the #ActiBlizzWalkout calling for permanent

work from home options. If return to the office were made mandatory, I would not be able to afford relocation or commuting and would be forced to leave the company. This issue affects me and my family personally.” He continued, stating, “My thoughts are with them today. I look forward to them being free from the Insider Traders, Abusers, and Antivaxxers that leech our studios while contributing nothing.”

ABK was acquired in January by technology giant Microsoft Corp. for \$68.7 billion, a record for the video game industry. The merger would result in the creation of the third largest video game company by revenue when the deal closes. It followed a year of significant profits for many in the industry. ABK alone had \$9.05 billion in revenue in 2021, up 18.2 percent.

Following the announcements of the planned walkout, ABK refused to back down on its new company-wide policy but did allow for individual development studios within ABK to make their own decisions on whether to enforce a vaccine mandate.

The Game Workers Alliance (GWA) is a section of the Communications Workers of America union (CWA) formed in late January by Raven Quality Assurance workers, a subsidiary of ABK. ABK has not formally recognized the GWA, most recently going out of its way this week to spite workers involved by promoting most of its Quality Assurance (QA) workers to full-time, boosting wages to a \$20 minimum except for unionized workers.

The formation of the GWA is part of the CWA’s Campaign to Organize Digital Employees (CODE), which also saw the creation of a union among Google workers, known as the Alphabet Workers Union, the same month. Following decades of declining jobs in the telecommunications industry and falling dues-paying membership, the CWA launched the CODE campaign

to shore up its dues base.

Activision Blizzard workers should beware. For decades, the CWA has betrayed the workers that it nominally represents. This includes its isolation and shutting down of the strikes of 22,000 AT&T workers across the US South in 2019 and 40,000 Verizon workers in 2016, giving the corporations a free hand to impose sweeping cuts.

The CWA has attempted to expand its reach in ABK for some time, notably in its intervention in a 2021 strike by ABK workers. The strike erupted on December 9 after Raven Software suddenly laid off 12 QA workers. Strikers demanded then ABK CEO Bobby Kotick and the board of directors step down, the reinstatement of the 12 fired QA workers, the conversion of all QA contractors to full-time employees, improved representation, pay transparency and unbiased third-party audits.

The Workers For A Better ABK increased ties with the CWA and AFL-CIO during the two-month strike. By the end of the strike on January 22, with seemingly none of the workers' demands achieved, the only development was the formation of the currently unrecognized GWA-CWA.

The present struggle emerging among ABK workers unfolds amidst an awakening class struggle internationally in response to the deadly effects of the ruling class' homicidal policies toward the COVID-19 pandemic and soaring cost of living. ABK workers and those across the video game industry face brutal workplace practices, experiencing constant mental and physical drain from regular "crunch" periods and extensive mandatory overtime.

However, workers should not look to the CWA or other pro-company unions but mobilize their own independent strength in unity with technology workers in the US and globally. Activision workers interested in finding out more about building rank-and-file committees should contact the WSWS.



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