

SAG-AFTRA announces strike authorization vote against video game companies, more interim agreements

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On Friday, Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) President Fran Drescher released a statement announcing the union’s plan to hold a strike authorization vote against the video game industry. The vote will be held from September 5 to September 25. The “Interactive Media Agreement” between SAG-AFTRA and the multibillion-dollar video game publishers, such as Activision Productions, Electronic Arts, Epic Games, Take 2 Productions and WB (Warner Bros) Games, expired last year.

If the strike authorization is approved by the membership, the National Board of SAG-AFTRA is under no obligation to call a strike. The last time SAG-AFTRA members struck against the video game industry was in 2016-2017. That 183-day strike, which was isolated by the union, ended in a major sellout that left voice and performance artists with a pathetic “residual” system that is not based on sales, but on how many recording sessions the actor works for a game, topping out at just over \$2,000.

While about 11,000 writers from the Writers Guild of America (WGA) have been on strike since May 2, only about one-third of the SAG-AFTRA membership joined the writers on strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) on July 14.

Reporting on the video game strike authorization vote, industry publications *Deadline* and *Variety* noted that the demands SAG-AFTRA has put forward in the video game negotiations mirror the similarly weak demands the union has advanced in its discussions with the AMPTP. In response to the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the video game, film and television industry, SAG-AFTRA is asking for “informed consent” and that “appropriate” payments be made to actors for their digital likeness.

As evidenced from the microscopic residual checks actors and writers have been left with under the streaming model, leaving it up to the corporations to decide what are “appropriate” payments is a recipe for disaster.

In addition to toothless “protections” from AI, the union is requesting seriously inadequate wage increases: 11 percent retroactive to the end of the contract, and 4 percent increases in the second and third years of the agreement. Considering the vast majority of actors and writers live in expensive urban areas such as New York City and Los Angeles, these wage hikes will not keep pace with cost-of-living increases, much less make up for past declines.

The fact that SAG-AFTRA has only now announced that more of the

165,000+ membership might be going on strike on the end of the month is revealing. Why, many SAG-AFTRA members are wondering, have their fellow union members, who in many cases are working for the same companies, such as Warner Bros., not been on strike with them since July?

On Thursday the union announced several more scab “interim agreements” with major production companies. *Variety* reported on Thursday that SAG-AFTRA granted approval for three AMC Networks shows to restart production overseas, including two spin-offs from the once highly popular *Walking Dead*.

Variety reported that the union has agreed to “more than 300 projects since the strike began.” While AMC is not part of the AMPTP, it is hardly an “independent” or small producer. AMC Networks is majority-owned by the billionaire Dolan family, and the shows produced by AMC invariably end up on the major streaming platforms.

James Dolan, with an estimated net worth of \$2 billion, named his wife, Kristin Dolan, to be the CEO of AMC this past May. In a press release announcing the hire, AMC noted that Kristin Dolan would get a yearly salary worth “at least \$2 million.”

While SAG-AFTRA has tried to spin the “interim agreements” as examples showing how easily their demands could be met, this ignores the point of a strike, which is for workers to withhold their labor in order to economically damage the corporations. By issuing “interim agreements,” none of which were discussed or voted on by the membership prior to their approval, the union is creating divisions and helping the companies and the AFL-CIO isolate the strike.

This is why striking writers and actors cannot leave the current struggle in the hands of Drescher and the rest of the well-paid SAG-AFTRA and WGA bureaucracies. Independent rank-and-file committees, comprised of militant and trusted actors and writers must be built to unite the entire industry and other sections of the working class in a common struggle. There is enormous support in the working class for the plight of film, video game and television workers. The same threats of automation, inflation and job loss affect every section of the working class.

On Thursday, striking actors spoke to WSWs reporters on the picket line about the state of the struggle.

J.R. an actor, said he was walking the picket line “to fight for protections from AI. We’ve already seen studios scan us before, especially Disney. If you’ve ever worked on a *Star Wars* project, they’ve definitely scanned a

lot of people for that one. I have to protect my job, protect it from getting automated by a computer.”

Commenting on the so-called consent forms that are being touted as “protections” for the actors from AI, J.R. commented, “The studios will go through enough people until they find those who are willing to do it. So unless it’s completely agreed upon by everyone, then they’re going to find ways around it.”

Chioke, a striking actor, told us, “The strike is definitely warranted. A lot of actors and writers are out here working really hard to get opportunities that matter so we can live a good life. People travel from all over the world to become actors and writers. Imagine working your dream job, but it doesn’t pay you enough?”

Chioke spoke about the tiny residuals actors have been receiving and the fact that many have not had “any compensation for your name, image, and likeness being used all over the world, even though other people are getting paid.

“Beyond the WGA and SAG, a lot of other unions are striking, a lot of other workers, fast food workers, teachers, nurses. Everybody should get paid enough to be able to live a good life. Hollywood is the face of the world, so to speak, everybody sees it, but every other part of the world is a part of the body too. So everybody needs to be taken care of in this world.

“Every worker,” he went on, “that you see every day, the parking attendant, the janitor, the grocery store worker, every person who contributes to making this all run smoothly, they’re valuable. No teacher or nurse, no one who gets up and tries their best and participates in the economy should be struggling.

“There are so many resources,” Chioke concluded. “How much is wasted every day?”

Jacob, a SAG-AFTRA member, told the WWSWS, “It’s unbelievable that we’re out here. It seems very strange to have to ask for something so simple, and that it’s taken so long and that nothing that we’re asking for is ridiculous. This isn’t going to be a sustainable career if these changes aren’t made now.”

Suraj, another SAG-AFTRA member, agreed, “Actors in general have been talking for years about how our contracts don’t reflect the current world that we’re in with streaming. Because the business model has changed so rapidly right under our feet.”

“The numbers are out there,” Jacob said. “You can see the exact dollar amount of how much it would affect these companies, how much it would affect their salaries. It’s nothing. It’s ridiculous at this point. These people out here are artists, and there’s this strange business side that’s attached itself to the artists. And while it can be symbiotic in a lot of ways, art and business don’t typically work well together.”

Suraj added, “It also speaks to an underestimation of labor overall. We’re seeing this in a lot of industries, people underestimating the resolve of people and the extent to which people feel disillusioned—actors feel disillusioned and writers as well.

“In the past, we may have taken deals we didn’t want to take. Maybe this has gone too far, so that the majority of us are now saying, ‘well, hold on. We have to change the way this moves forward.’ The companies are making the very incorrect assumption that if they release some talking points, there will be dissent among the ranks and that will be it. Frankly, I don’t think they’ve sat at our dinner tables for the last 10 years.”

Mather, a striking actor, said, “This kind of thing could already have happened five, seven years ago. A lot of people would have signed on to a strike authorization at the time.

“We’re talking about wages, raising our minimum contract in a realistic way that reflects the cost of living today and residuals in streaming, which have been how actors get by. I know actors who’ve worked on streaming series for multiple seasons and have not seen any residuals, or just the most modest returns. We can’t live like that. Then there’s the problems with artificial intelligence.

“This is the biggest labor action for this union in decades,” Mather continued. “I’m glad that the writers are out here with us at the same time. It’s good when we show up in force.”

Commenting on the implementation of AI, the actor added, “Certainly, for background actors, it’s very threatening. It could just put them entirely out of work. It’s very frightening to feel that as an actor in a show, you don’t know what part of you is going to show up in a program.”

On the issue of the current output coming from the major studios, Mather said, “I don’t want to say that there’s not good stuff being made, because there is, but movies particularly are in a vulnerable position because everyone watches at home. It’s hurt the big theater experience and therefore the studios have just decided to back the tent-pole film model, the Marvel movies.

“Those aren’t the movies I like, personally... but it’s very hard to make a \$5 or 10 million movie now. There’s not a lot of interest from the studios in that. There are probably many small projects that we don’t know about that do address [social issues]. Occasionally, one of them gets through into the larger culture. I’m guessing that the studio doesn’t want to put out a big movie on climate change because ... it’s depressing.

“I’m a fan of the ’70s, that decade of film-making because a lot of interesting things came out, and a lot of those social issues made it to the forefront of the culture. It’s not like that right now.

“[Hollywood] is mass culture, or what’s left of it ... it’s all hollowed out for the Marvel franchise. And it’s boring. It’s stultifying for the audience.”



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