

After SAG-AFTRA delays 18 months, video game performers strike against major companies

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Members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) walked out Friday against the major video game companies, after working nearly two years without a contract.

The strike affects more than 2,500 off-camera voiceover performers, on-camera (motion capture, stunt) performers, stunt coordinators, singers, dancers, puppeteers and background performers who work in the video game industry.

The strike comes 18 months after the last contract expired and 10 months after workers voted for a strike by 98.32 percent. Rather than call the walkout at the time the vote was held and when much of the union was engaged in a prolonged strike against the billion-dollar entertainment conglomerates, the SAG-AFTRA bureaucratic leadership chose to stall, dissipate their members' militancy to the greatest degree possible and wait until below-the-line workers in Hollywood penned a deal with the corporations.

As always, the union leaders work to weaken and sabotage workers' efforts to defend their interests.

The strike—the second in the industry in the past 10 years (the last took place in 2016)—will affect all video game companies that are signatories to the Interactive Media Agreement (IMA), which includes but is not limited to Activision Blizzard, Blindlight, Disney Character Voices, Electronic Arts Productions Inc., Formosa Interactive, Insomniac Games, Llama Productions, Take 2 Productions, VoiceWorks Productions and WB Games.

As the strike begins, SAG-AFTRA has already exempted the San Diego Comic-Con from strike rules, allowing actors to promote whatever gaming projects

they are currently working on. This is already a blow from within.

The video game industry is one of the largest and most profitable in the entertainment field, dwarfing the film and recording industries. In 2022, the video gaming industry generated approximately \$184.4 billion, compared to \$26.2 billion for the recording industry and \$26 billion for the film industry.

The video game actors/performers, however, receive a pittance in comparison to the wages and benefits paid to their film counterparts, even though they belong to the same union and are in an industry that generates considerably more profit.

It should also be noted that only a few months ago SAG-AFTRA negotiated (in talks that were kept secret) a deal behind the backs of video game voiceover actors with Replica Studios, allowing the company to create and use digital replicas of actors' voices, with the “informed consent” of the performers for use in games and other interactive media projects.

So, when SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher says, “We’re not going to consent to a contract that allows companies to abuse A.I. to the detriment of our members. Enough is enough. When these companies get serious about offering an agreement our members can live—and work—with, we will be here, ready to negotiate,” this should be taken with a large grain of salt. The union has already demonstrated that it will sell out voiceover actors without blinking an eye.

Workers should also be able to see through Drescher's demagoguery by this time. Last year, she more or less compared the actors' struggle to the French Revolution and suggested SAG-AFTRA was ready to storm the Bastille! Instead, actors had a rotten deal

imposed on them. Moreover, all the film and television unions are unable and unwilling to fight the “great contraction” and job losses, because they accept the present corporate set-up.

SAG-AFTRA has no intention of ensuring that workers in the video game industry are any more protected from the ravages of Artificial Intelligence (AI) than workers in the film industry.

Chief Negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland also returned this week to making militant noises. He argued that the “video game industry generates billions of dollars in profit annually. The driving force behind that success is the creative people who design and create those games.” He claimed that SAG-AFTRA members “who bring memorable and beloved game characters to life ... deserve and demand the same fundamental protections as performers in film, television, streaming, and music: fair compensation and the right of informed consent for the A.I. use of their faces, voices, and bodies.”

This is all just smoke and mirrors. As workers in Hollywood have been pointing out for over a year now, and as the WSWs has insisted repeatedly, “informed consent” is a travesty. All performers, aside from the huge stars, know that if they want to work, they will have to give consent or likely find themselves on the street.

Video game performers deserve the same pay and protections as their counterparts in the film industry. The reason they do not have them is because the union bureaucracy that is supposed to represent them does nothing of the sort. The well-heeled bureaucrats like Crabtree-Ireland work with management to keep wages and benefits down to maximize profits.

In a remarkable comment, SAG-AFTRA’s Interactive Media Agreement Negotiating Committee chair Sarah Elmaleh observed that “Eighteen months of negotiations have shown us that our employers are not interested in fair, reasonable AI protections, but rather flagrant exploitation.” Did it really take union officials 18 months to figure that out? We suspect that video game performers could have told them that at the start, one reason they and other SAG-AFTRA members voted nearly unanimously for a strike in September 2023. The union has dragged things out, hoping, pleading, begging for the companies to offer them something they could “sell” their members.

Workers in the gaming industry need to understand that the SAG-AFTRA officialdom have no strategy whatsoever for pursuing or winning a strike, which would require shutting down these vast companies. Workers in film and television are under attack by the conglomerates and Wall Street. They need a new perspective, based on opposition to the predatory profit system. SAG-AFTRA leaders will come up with more concessions and organize new defeats. We urge workers to build democratically controlled rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracy and the capitalist political parties. Only when workers take the struggle into their own hands will anything be accomplished.



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