

The SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy and the video game performers' strike

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The strike by some 2,500 video game performers and voice actors, members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), has entered its fifth week. According to media reports, there has not been any progress on the issues separating the parties. There have been no formal negotiations at all, aside from those conducted between the union and individual companies and games behind the backs of video game performers.

SAG-AFTRA announced last week there would be no negotiations scheduled before September, leaving bureaucrats free to attend the Democratic National Convention and participate in the lavish activities of that big business party, while video game performers were left blowing in the wind with the future existence of their professions in doubt.

The performers' previous contract expired some 22 months ago. The union tops revealed in a Zoom meeting on Monday they have yet to decide how long the new contract they have been negotiating will last, or whether it will be retroactive.

The SAG-AFTRA meeting revealed that officials have not done a lot of thinking about anything related to improving the conditions of video game performers. The Zoom call underscored the harsh fact that striking video game performers face two opponents, the companies and their own union.

When one worker asked about secondary compensation, or residuals, union officials could not have demonstrated their disdain more forcefully. They replied they had decided to focus all of their attention this year on the question of artificial intelligence (AI) and that therefore, issues like residuals, which they *tried* to work on the last time, would have to wait until the next round of negotiations.

While SAG-AFTRA officials claim they are focusing all their attention on AI and avoiding secondary, "distracting" issues like fair compensation, what does their "focus" actually mean? In reality, they downplay the threat represented by AI and refuse to clarify its significance to workers.

After one caller kept repeating over and over how stupid the corporations were and how copyright law provided adequate protections from AI, the officials, rather than correcting her and clearing things up, only reinforced her view. They then revealed their own conception, asserting that

these companies think that they have more leverage than the film and television companies because of the way the business operates, and the relative magnitude of performance to the overall resources that are committed to the development of a game.

In other words, the companies feel themselves to be in a strong position because they are in a billion-dollar industry and only pay their talent peanuts. But this is the result of one rotten contract after another that did not take "secondary issues" such as livable wages and residuals into consideration.

One performer called out the SAG-AFTRA bureaucrats, asking why there was only one picket at a time, whereas last year during the actors' strike there were multiple pickets at studios in both Los Angeles and in New York City.

The responses indicated the union is entirely unprepared and unwilling to develop a serious strategy. The strike has been forced on them by the recalcitrance of the companies, unwilling to make any concessions and unafraid of the SAG-AFTRA officialdom and the anger of the membership. The union's only goal is to wrap up this strike as quickly as possible and return to business as usual, leaving many of their members without a job or a career.

The first response to the question about picketing was this:

We're taking a slightly more tactical kind of, not quite surprise approach, but just sort of more of a potentially difficult disruptive approach, and so, and also, just the nature of where production, how production occurs in this space is slightly nuanced and different. So we are, we're doing that. We're also focusing a lot because this, you know, an entire arena of pressure in this space really does exist online, and so digital actions are also of great interest and importance to us.

This is double-talk and every serious worker knows it. Digital actions? Other than an occasional tweet, there have been zero to

date.

This first official turned the microphone over to the national director of organizing, Maggie Russell-Brown, who said,

No, I mean, I think you hit it, right? I mean, this is ... you know, strikes are meant to be disruptive. There are different tactics that we need to use, depending on the work that is occurring and how we can sort of interrupt business as usual for the companies. While pickets are great and we need them for sure, there are other actions that we've decided to pivot to in the interest of being disruptive. Great.

There was no mention of what these actions would be, if any had already taken place, or if any were scheduled in the future—or even how workers could participate other than by turning to the union website that essentially tells them to continue what they are doing.

Another SAG-AFTRA official then argued that certain companies

may have signed an interim [agreement], which makes their status as good guy or bad guy a little bit complicated because they might be struck. But they might also have signed, you know, one project that's offering AI protections. Then they might also have a different project that is side letter six [side letter to the contract allowing companies to continue production on projects already in production 60 days before the strike began]. And then they might have a third [project] that is struck. So, who's a good guy and who's a bad guy can get a little bit woolly in this instance?

The reason this all “gets complicated” is that SAG-AFTRA has signed one contract after another including such provisions. Moreover, union officials attempt to wear down workers by forcing members to scab through the signing of interim agreements with individual companies, thereby weakening the overall strike action.

The officials repeatedly brought up Monday the fact they had already signed over 50 interim agreements with individual companies, or games. These contracts were signed by executive fiat, such as the one at Replica earlier in the year or at Narrativ last week, without any vote taking place, or any indication during negotiations that they were even taking place.

The bureaucrats claim that they are seeking AI protections for workers, but other than slight changes in language, none of the contracts SAG-AFTRA has signed, either for video game performers or for film and television actors, provides any kind

of oversight mechanism or means of protecting performers from the willful misuse of their persons by AI.

The gulf that separates SAG-AFTRA officials from rank-and-file performers was brought out in the comment of a bargaining team member who said, astonishingly, that

one of the things that I think perplexed us the entire way through is why we [the companies and the union] were not partners in this fight as opposed to on opposing sides of the table, because the threat to them is just as great as the threat to us.

In fact, the union resolves that “perplexity” precisely by acting as a “partner” to the companies *in practice*, while verbally posturing as their opponent.

While the assembled SAG-AFTRA bureaucrats waffled and dodged, many performers demonstrated they were aware of the seriousness of the struggle before them.

One worker on the call was worried that “when I’m thinking about, you know, whether or not to audition for a new job, have I already let the voice out of the bag, as it were?” Another referred to the use of AI without compensation as plagiarism and identity theft.

And a third worker wanted to know what could be done to inform other performers on social media of roles they turn down because of concerns over AI, given the fact that one must sign NDAs (non-disclosure agreements) before an audition?

The Zoom meeting demonstrated the bankruptcy of the SAG-AFTRA officialdom, which operates as an arm of corporate management, seeking to oversee the introduction of AI as seamlessly as possible.

The only way forward is to take the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucracy and put it under the democratic control of the video game performers themselves in rank-and-file committees that will formulate real demands, for real protections and real compensation for their creative input.



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