

SAG-AFTRA continues to sabotage video game strike, signing 80 interim agreements

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Officials of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) announced this week they had penned interim interactive media agreements (IIMA) or tiered-budget independent interactive agreements with at least 80 separate video game projects.

These agreements have been reached in the midst of a strike by over 2,500 video performers and voice actors that began July 26. The performers' contract expired almost two years ago, but SAG-AFTRA stalled on calling a strike, despite overwhelming support for such action, for 18 months.

The use of interim agreements is a continuation of the tactic pioneered during the SAG-AFTRA strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) last year, which allowed the bureaucrats to weaken the strike from the inside by taking workers off the picket line and sending them back to work.

Not only does this tactic undermine the seven-week strike of video game workers, SAG-AFTRA officials have publicly stated there has been little to no progress in negotiations since the strike began. In fact, there have been no official negotiations.

The interim agreements process is anti-democratic to the core. Just as the initial bargaining positions advanced by the union were not voted on by or discussed with the rank-and-file, these interim agreements are forced on workers with no discussions, much less any sort of a vote.

The announcement of the agreements came as SAG-AFTRA also announced it had signed an IIMA with AAA game publisher Lightspeed L.A., which makes the Massively Multiplayer online (MMO) game LAST SENTINEL.

SAG-AFTRA's National Director and Chief Negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland said of the agreement, "I am delighted to be partnering with Lightspeed L.A. Their upcoming game may be set in a world of technology run

amok, but by agreeing to equitable terms, they're working to make sure that the real future will not be a dystopian one for performers."

Crabtree-Ireland, the ninth-highest paid union official in the US, earning \$1.02 million last year, goes on about the near future being "dystopian" while video game performers and voice actors have and will continue to receive a pittance for their creative work.

While Crabtree-Ireland's bank account has been in the black for some time, the tale for talent in the video game industry is very different. Voice actor Jennifer Hale (*Avatar: The Last Airbender*; *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*; *Baldur's Gate*; *X-Men '97*; *Metal Gear* and others), someone with hundreds of credits, revealed in an interview with *Variety* that one of the

first video game franchises Hale ever worked on was "Metal Gear," in which she voiced female lead Naomi Hunter. Hale explains she was paid scale for two sessions totaling \$1,200, while the game itself would go on to gross around \$176 million.

"What I wish everyone would do was keep asking the actual question, which is, 'there's a lot of money being made here. Where is it going?' And in the current setup, the way our system operates, and this whole idea of shareholder supremacy, it's flowing to the 1%. If you flow so much money, you can't even feed the people who made it possible."

The industry, as Hale indicates, is tremendously profitable, with the studios raking in over \$183 billion last year. Yet the talent in video games do not even receive residuals. Union leaders had the audacity to assert in a

recent meeting that they had decided to focus all of their attention this year on the question of artificial intelligence (AI). Therefore, they insisted, issues like residuals, which they *tried* to work on the last time, would have to wait until the next round of negotiations. This translates to, “Deal with dystopia for a few more years, because we are quite happy with the level of miserable pay you receive as a worker in the video game industry.”

Interactive Media Agreement Negotiating Committee Chair Sarah Elmaleh said of the agreement with Lightspeed L.A. that the current strike

has always been as much about the start of work with proper A.I. protections as it is stopping work without them. Lightspeed L.A. understands how crucial these protections are to the actors, and followed through with an outstanding commitment not only to this cast, but their future casts. They made their genuine appreciation of performers as contributors concrete and impactful. I am thrilled about this partnership and cannot wait to see what this talented team of developers and performers makes together.

This is all simply smoke and mirrors. There are no proper A.I. protections for any of the workers covered in any of the IIMAs, or for film and television actors for that matter. The industry is making use of AI to destroy jobs and lower costs—and for no other reason.

In her comments to *Variety*, Jennifer Hale pointed out that

AI is coming for all of us ... Because the truth is, AI is just a tool like a hammer. If I take my hammer, I could build you a house. I can also take that same hammer and I can smash your skin and destroy who you are.

Precisely. The question is, who wields the hammer? In the hands of the capitalist studios and video game publishers, AI will *only* be used to “smash” and “destroy.” The stranglehold of the corporations over cultural life has to be broken by a politically conscious working class.

Every evasion of that reality by SAG-AFTRA, every

claim that the rights of the performers can be *reconciled* with the ruthless profit drive of the corporations is a blow against workers and a gift to the corporations. The latter are simply prepared to wait until the union wears down and demoralizes the performers sufficiently that they will accept a rotten deal.

SAG-AFTRA Chief Contracts Officer Ray Rodriguez observed in July that the “industry has told us point blank that they do not necessarily consider everyone who is rendering movement performance to be a performer that is covered by the collective bargaining agreement” and that some physical performances are being treated simply as “data.” So such performances would have no protection whatsoever.

However, the union’s goal, to obtain a contractual clause containing language about “informed consent,” is also useless, mostly an attempt to throw dust in the eyes of its members and save face. Once more, the corporations, with Wall Street breathing down their necks, are determined to wipe out entire crafts and professions. “Informed consent” means nothing when all the power is in the hands of conglomerates. Refusing to “consent” for many will simply be a way of getting kicked out of the industry. With many performers desperate for work in a contracting job market, who will be able to refuse the demands of giant studios?

The SAG-AFTRA proposed language, its “common sense A.I. protections,” will not protect a single worker from having his or her likeness, creativity and art being stolen by unscrupulous gaming or other corporations.

By suppressing discussion and making the IIMAs—signed behind workers’ backs—as the baseline for future negotiations with the bigger companies, they have given the latter a green light to steal workers’ likenesses. The creation of a vast data base will at some point in the future lead to the destruction of these jobs in the industry.

The only way workers can carry this struggle forward is to take the reins of leadership out of the hands of the bureaucrats and place them firmly in the hands of the workers in democratically controlled rank-and-file committees that are independent of the two parties of big business as well as the union hierarchy.



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