

Seven-month strike by video game performers remains isolated by SAG-AFTRA

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The Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) had video game performers take to the picket line on March 5 for the first time in several months. The wildfires that have devastated the Los Angeles area were one factor behind the interruption of public strike activity.

Some 30 people showed up in the rain outside WB [Warner Bros.] Games in Burbank, California. This was considerably fewer than the 150 to 200 people who generally picketed in the summer and autumn last year. The strike, initially involving some 2,600 performers, began more than seven months ago on July 26, 2024.

According to a SAG-AFTRA statement in October, the only sticking point in the negotiations remained artificial intelligence (AI) protection, with a spokesperson for the industry asserting the parties had reached agreement on “24 out of 25 proposals.” SAG-AFTRA has said virtually nothing since, and the picketing more or less came to a halt well before the fires broke out.

The union has not been able to reach a settlement on AI with the video game companies’ bargaining committee, which includes Activision Productions, Blindlight, Disney Character Voices, Electronic Arts Productions, Formosa Interactive, Insomniac Games, Llama Productions, Take 2 Productions and WB Games. However, SAG-AFTRA has continued the practice adopted in the actors’ strike of 2023 of signing interim interactive media agreements (IIMA) with individual studios (and even with individual game projects belonging to strike-affected studios), behind workers’ backs.

The studios have reported that as of December 18 136 IIMAs had been signed, with the *Guardian* noting last month that the number had risen to over 160. These agreements were negotiated in secret and presented as a

fait accompli without giving workers a vote, much less a say.

Moreover, contrary to the snake oil being peddled by the SAG-AFTRA leadership (and the mainstream media), the language included in these interim agreements does little or nothing to protect workers from having their likenesses stolen and used for training AI. The language only provides that workers give their “informed consent” when it comes to the use of their image or likenesses.

As we have insisted repeatedly and certain performers themselves have observed, this simply means that workers, essentially with a gun to their heads, will either give their “consent” or they will not work in the industry.

And this is at a time when the video game industry is hemorrhaging jobs at a rate previously unseen. More than 34,000 games industry workers have been laid off since the beginning of 2021, with more layoffs occurring last year than the previous two years combined. The job losses have occurred at both indie as well as AAA (mid-sized or major) studios.

Microsoft laid off over 3,000 employees last year. Bungie has cut 17 percent of its workforce, while Sony Interactive Entertainment, Embracer Group (which slashed 7,890 jobs from August 2023 to March 2024), Unity Technologie, Electronic Arts, Epic Games, Take-Two Interactive, Riot Games, Ubisoft and others announcing significant job cuts as well.

Quite a few studios have simply shut down and discharged their entire staff, including Neon Koi (Sony), Firewalk Studios, Player First Games, Volition, London Studios, Riot Forge, Pixelopus, Ready at Dawn, Monolith Productions and numerous others. In a few cases, such as Neon Koi, these are subsidiaries of much larger corporations.

SAG-AFTRA Executive Director Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, the ninth-highest-paid union official in the US, pocketing over \$1 million in workers' dues money a year, stated at a conference entitled the "Inaugural Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Workers' Rights" that, "We're up against the biggest corporate interests and the biggest political interests that you can imagine, and working together in unity is absolutely where our power comes from."

However, what workers mean by unity, and what the well-heeled Crabtree-Ireland has in mind are two different things. For the rank-and-file, "unity" means a fighting solidarity with their co-workers, up to and including shutting down the entire industry to win demands that correspond to their needs, not the needs of corporate profit. When Crabtree-Ireland demands "unity," he is insisting that strikers and union members shut up and take orders from the SAG-AFTRA leadership, no matter how disastrous its policies. Moreover, the forces with whom officials like this would like to "unite" are industry figures and Democratic Party politicians, the actual enemy of workers' unity and solidarity.

Crabtree-Ireland made this clear when he went on to say, "We're going to have so many challenges on the federal level, [but] in California, we can use public policy to advance collective bargaining and use collective bargaining to advance public policy." In other words, there will be problems with Donald Trump, but we are happy in California with Gavin Newsom and the Democrats. This is a recipe for betrayal and defeat.

The voice actors need to ask some sharp, probing questions. Why did SAG-AFTRA not send video game performers out on strike when their contract expired while their brothers and sisters in the same union in the film and television industry were on strike in 2023, thereby weakening both struggles? Why was there no talk of "unity" with Zenimax video game workers who went out on a one-day strike in November, or, for that matter, with any other section of workers who have walked out over the last seven months?

It also allows the conglomerates to idle certain studios to save money. Many of the studios that are in the official employer unit have been in the forefront of the jobs massacre over the last two years.

The conduct of the SAG-AFTRA leadership

throughout the strike has isolated the performers and no doubt discouraged a good many of them. They know that the use of AI under existing conditions will result in the loss of thousands of jobs and the elimination of entire professions.

The union has no stomach for the fight required because it involves explosive social and political realities. AI is an extraordinary advance, but under capitalism it comes into being at the expense of voice actors and others. The implementation and use of AI must be under the control of the workers themselves, not the corporate thieves.

This is a struggle that can only be waged by the rank-and-file, but to do that, video game performers have to escape the straitjacket imposed on them by the union officials, allies of the big business Democrats. To move forward and break the logjam, the first step is the creation of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees independent of both the union and the two parties of big business. It only takes a few people to start a committee, but it is the necessary first step, without which conditions will only continue to deteriorate.



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