

Video game performers' strike enters its 9th month

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Video game performers took to the picket line Wednesday, one week after their strike entered its ninth month. After months of no picketing at all, the action at Formosa Interactive LLC in Burbank, California was the third picket in the last month, with about 50 people taking part.

The Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), the bargaining agent for the striking performers, argues that artificial intelligence (AI) protections remain the only point of significant contention between the two sides. Picketing video game performer Seth Allyn Austin, on social media, insisted that performers were “looking for fair and comprehensive AI protections, looking for transparency, compensation and consent.”

What video game workers want is one thing, what SAG-AFTRA will agree to is another. The union has isolated the performers for months, leaving them to fight giant corporations on their own. SAG-AFTRA's position is that it will accept “informed consent,” which would essentially leave performers to negotiate AI protections with the corporations on an individual basis.

Does any thinking performer imagine that if he or she refuses “consent,” that he or she will find work? As for fair compensation, SAG-AFTRA has already acknowledged it will not seek residuals this time around as the union claims it wants to focus solely on AI protections, which they have put entirely in the “informed consent” basket.

The picket at Formosa Interactive LLC came only a day after a strike authorization vote by 300 quality assurance workers at ZeniMax Online Studios, a subsidiary of Microsoft. The workers, members of Communications Workers of America (CWA) Locals 2100, 2108 and 6215 (ZeniMax Workers United-CWA), voted 94 percent for a strike. The workers have been negotiating with Microsoft for nearly two years.

Microsoft bought Activision Blizzard in 2023, and the latter is one of the companies represented by the video game companies' bargaining committee. The committee also speaks for Blindlight, Disney Character Voices, Electronic

Arts Productions, Formosa Interactive, Insomniac Games, Llama Productions, Take 2 Productions and WB Games.

The agreement between those companies and SAG-AFTRA expired in November 2022. It took the union almost a year to organize a strike vote among video game performers, during which time thousands of actor members of SAG-AFTRA had undertaken a prolonged strike. The video game strike authorization September 1, 2023 passed by 98.32 percent. A strike was not called for another nearly 11 months, on July 25, 2024. To suggest that the union was dragging its heels would be more than generous. In fact, SAG-AFTRA did everything in its power to avoid a conflict. The companies, however, were adamant.

While SAG-AFTRA claims that AI protections are the only outstanding issues in its dispute, the CWA asserts it has already reached a “historic” tentative agreement (TA) on AI with Microsoft that

commits ZeniMax to uses of AI that augment human ingenuity and capacities, to ensure that these tools enhance worker productivity, growth, and satisfaction without causing workers harm. ZeniMax has agreed to provide notice to the union in cases where AI implementation may impact the work of union members and to bargain those impacts upon request.

In other words, the TA offers no protection at all. The corporations are simply obliged to provide notice that they are destroying jobs.

The CWA has said it is still attempting to come to terms with Microsoft “over better wages, workplace improvements, and key concerns, including a lack of remote work options and the company's replacement of in-house quality assurance work with outsourced labor without notifying the union.”

And, again, the union merely asks to be “notified.” Union

officials will keep their big salaries, video game workers will lose their livelihoods.

There has been no attempt to date to unite the struggles of the video game performers in the two unions who work in some cases for the same corporation. Isolating and dividing workers is the standard practice of the unions at present. The last thing either SAG-AFTRA or CWA wants to see is a powerful mobilization against the corporations.

On March 26, the corporations' bargaining committee presented an updated counter-proposal of the Interactive Media Agreement to SAG-AFTRA, which "directly addresses several issues the union has identified as important components of a deal," a spokesperson told *Variety*.

While SAG-AFTRA has yet to respond to the latest offer, SAG-AFTRA Executive Director Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, who is the ninth highest-paid union official in the US, receiving over \$1 million in compensation a year, told *Variety* that the union is considering asking consumers to boycott the companies in question.

It's definitely a tool that's in our toolbox, because we are actively having conversations, both formally and informally, with the industry, it's not a tool we have chosen to deploy yet—but we absolutely are willing to deploy it if the circumstances demand, and we absolutely have not ruled out doing that if necessary. But I'm hopeful that we'll be able to find the path to an agreement without having to pull that trigger.

He went on,

I think consumers definitely can support the strike by, first of all, just sharing their disappointment with the companies through social media channels, through customer service channels.

This is pathetic, and a recipe for defeat. A union that is capable of such half-hearted and miserable proposals ("sharing their disappointment"!) is incapable of leading a serious struggle against ruthless opponents. Video game performers receive a relative pittance in one of the most lucrative industries on the planet.

SAG-AFTRA has now signed 180 interim interactive media agreements (IIMA) with video game companies, many the subsidiaries of corporations with whom SAG-AFTRA is currently negotiating.

This shows an increase of at least 20 such agreements over the last month. The IIMAs do not contain any AI protections for workers, merely asking the companies to ask for "informed consent" from video game performers for the use of their replicas. Not one of the IIMAs was put to a vote by the membership, but the deals send workers back on the job while their brothers and sisters on strike are dwindling in numbers.

In the last week, SAG-AFTRA also announced a new waiver agreement for students and game jam developers [a game jam is "a collaborative, time-bound event where participants create video games from scratch"] that allows them to work with video game performers still on strike.

The challenges facing the video game performers are very real. The companies are determined, for all intents and purposes, to implement technology that sooner or later they hope will replace most of the performers. The SAG-AFTRA and CWA leaderships, which accept the economic and political status quo, are incapable of defending a single job.

AI is a revolutionary technology, but it has to be placed under workers' control, not employed by capitalist financial sharks to destroy entire professions. The video game strike, like it or not, raises political and social questions. It is an existential battle.

The issue of organizing independently of the union apparatus becomes decisive. Workers need to build rank-and-file committees that can develop a strategy for confronting billion-dollar corporations. This would become the start of an initiative throughout the entertainment industry—the development of committees that begin with what workers need, above all, ending the corporate stranglehold over film, television, music, video games and other fields.



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