

SAG-AFTRA continues isolation of video game performers, on strike for more than 10 months

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The strike by video game performers, members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), has now entered its eleventh month. There has not been a picket since April 2, almost two months ago, and the union has been largely silent on the state of negotiations on the Interactive Media Agreement (IMA).

The one recent public action taken by the union was the launching of an unfair labor practice (ULP) suit May 19 against Epic Games for the unauthorized use of artificial intelligence (AI) to produce the voice of Darth Vader.

The companies, in an obvious contradiction in terms, have also made *two* “best and last” offers in the past several weeks, on April 30, and then after SAG-AFTRA’s response, May 9.

Following the April 30 proposal, SAG-AFTRA issued a statement to *Variety* that “condemns” the release of the IMA proposal and explained that the union had “responded to that offer within 72 hours—on May 2—with our own response to the open issues relating to artificial intelligence, we have to date received no response to our counter offer.”

SAG-AFTRA subsequently released the details of their counter-proposal (<https://www.sagaftra.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/IMA%20Comparison%20Chart.pdf>), along with what has so far been agreed upon and where the two sides are still at odds. The union asserted that “While negotiations have resulted in finding common ground on some contract terms, we remain far apart on provisions that will ensure fundamental A.I. protections for our members.”

SAG-AFTRA also commented, “The statement suggesting that the union would ‘walk away’ from negotiations on this contract is absurd and the opposite of the truth. It is the employers who have threatened—through backchannel representatives—to move work to foreign countries and recast performers, in an unsuccessful effort to intimidate our negotiating committee and membership to capitulate to their demands, it is the employers who have characterized their last counter as ‘their last and best offer,’ the union has taken no such step.”

It is demonstrably not true that a wide gulf separates the two sides. SAG-AFTRA officials, in fact, are desperate to come up with a formula, including some face-saving concessions or cosmetics, that they can sell to their angry, anxious members.

So far the union has signed over 180 Interim IMA’s, with not one of them put to a vote by the membership, which essentially allow companies that were struck to continue to develop individual games. The result of this process is the extreme isolation of those remaining on strike and the very real danger the union is hanging them out to dry.

The reactionary and retrograde Interim agreement template was pioneered during the strike by film and television actors in 2023, which allowed more actors to be on the job *during* the strike than in the corresponding period the following year after the strike *was over*.

A perusal of the union’s IMA proposal demonstrates that falling living standards and workers’ protections are not the concern of the union officials.

On the second page of the 17-page document, for example, the counter-proposal stipulates that the

creation of a new payment, the Secondary Performance Payment (SPP), is meant to protect Performance Capture (PCAP) Performers from being eliminated by generative artificial intelligence (GAI). However, the union hastens to add, “We are willing to give, however, on: the amount of payment, allowing for an annual audit, making the payment optional rather than mandatory.” How an “optional” payment protects anyone the counter-proposal does not explain.

As we have pointed out over and over, including during the film and television strike of 2023, “informed consent,” the supposed sticking point over which SAG-AFTRA claims to be battling with the conglomerates, is a false flag. Such “consent” for the vast majority of video game performers, as with workers in every other industry, comes down to this: either sign on the dotted line, or you will not work!

This fact becomes ever more apparent as one studio after another has closed its doors and lay-offs and reductions in force have been plaguing the industry over the past year.

The 24 percent wage increase over three years does not begin to make up for what voice actors and other performers have lost to inflation, especially in high-cost cities like Los Angeles. The video game industry brings in revenue at a rate that exceeds most other forms of entertainment, including sports, television, music or film. However, while leading figures in other entertainment fields can make substantial salaries, and those with regular work have a middle-class lifestyle, even leading figures in the video game field struggle to get by unless they are also involved in one of the other areas.

Moreover, while actors, musicians and writers can be paid (often miserably) for years, even decades, for a performance or work that generates tens of millions or hundreds of millions for studios or networks, video game performers get a flat rate (albeit higher for those in the top tier) and see no residuals. SAG-AFTRA officials went out of their way to state publicly they would not be seeking residual payments for video game performers during this round of negotiations because they tried and failed to achieve them during negotiations for the previous contract.

Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, SAG-AFTRA’s national executive director and chief negotiator, is the ninth-highest paid union official in the US, receiving over \$1

million in compensation annually, paid for by workers’ dues money.

To be blunt: artificial intelligence is an astonishing technology and advance, with revolutionary implications. However, under the system of production for profit, the giant conglomerates plan to use it as a weapon to lower costs and destroy tens of thousands of film, television and video games jobs. The issue of how and when and where artificial intelligence should be used in the creative process, and how and when and where it should not be used, has to be decided upon by performers, writers, animators, technicians and other creators. SAG-AFTRA is incapable of developing a strategy for defeating the companies because it accepts the present economic framework. It has isolated the video game performers for more than ten months, and it can only propose more of the same.

The current negotiations being carried out behind the backs of workers, the signing of undemocratic interim agreements that divide them and the inability to fight for decent wages and residuals demonstrate the necessity of organizing independently of the union bureaucracies. The way forward involves establishing rank-and-file committees independent of the union officialdom and Democratic Party influence to develop a strategy to combat the conglomerates and their attacks on jobs and living standards.

It is vital to make the decision to take the struggle out of the hands of well-heeled union leaders to defeat the billion-dollar corporations.



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