

Artificial Intelligence in the entertainment industry and the necessary socialist response

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And hence, with regard to technology above all else, we must ask ourselves: is it only an instrument of class oppression? It is enough to ask such a question to be able to answer at once: no, technology is a basic conquest of mankind. ... The machine strangles the wage-slave. But the wage-slave can only be freed through the machine. Herein lies the root of the whole question.—Leon Trotsky, “Culture and Socialism” (1927)

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in the entertainment industry as elsewhere has been and will continue to be inexorable. The issue of AI has been thrust into prominence by two interrelated developments.

First, the impact of AI on entertainment industry employment has been widely recognized as potentially massive. A report issued in January 2024 suggested that in the next three years alone some 204,000 “creative jobs” would be “adversely affected in the United States” by artificial intelligence. A recent headline in the *Los Angeles Times* asked, “As AI changes how movies are made, Hollywood crews ask: What’s left for us?”

Second, as an inevitable response, in a number of lengthy strikes and struggles carried out by actors, writers, below-the-line workers and video game performers, the fight for AI protections has been a central question.

The resistance of actors, writers, voice performers, animators and others is entirely legitimate and the plans of the entertainment industry employers, although unstated, are clearly aimed at wiping out vast numbers of positions. The fight against the job destruction has already been going on for several years now. Under the present union leaderships, which accept the profit system and the “right” of management to do whatever it likes, the fight has gone nowhere. None of the contracts and their “pledges” are worth the paper they are written on. How can this disastrous situation be reversed?

It is necessary to stand back a little and view the development of artificial intelligence with a wider lens.

Many workers in the entertainment industry recognize the rise of AI as an existential issue and not only because of the immediate threat of job decimation by the studios and other employers, many of them owned or controlled by banks, hedge funds and other financial operators. In the never-ending drive to increase profits through speed-up and the downsizing of staff, the strategic use of AI is likely, in the long term, to eliminate a wide swath of the industry, including entire professions or crafts.

Does that mean that AI should simply be opposed and banned? If such a thing were even possible, it would be hopelessly retrograde.

As the WSWS has argued, objectively, artificial intelligence “represents a major advance in technology with the capacity to enormously develop the productivity of labor and thereby provide the basis for social advancement.”

AI’s implications are truly revolutionary and potentially an immense

boon to humanity in its struggle to improve conditions and increase its capabilities and organize life in a rational and harmonious manner.

“In a socialist society,” we have argued, “the artificial intelligence and robotics revolution will create the circumstances for a massive elevation of not only the economic well-being of the population, but also its cultural life. The replacement of tedious and back-breaking occupations will mean not mass unemployment and destitution, but rather greater leisure and an expansion of workers’ opportunities for education, family life and cultural enrichment.”

In the hands of workers and put under their control, AI, like all important ground-breaking tools, will rapidly and collectively transform the entertainment industry, helping it to broaden and flower while at the same time eliminating much of the drudgery and making possible a far greater concentration on genuine creativity. If there are “grey areas”—should AI, for example, replace human voices or features in this or that instance?—solutions will be worked out by those actively involved, not on the basis of *financial concerns*, i.e., corporate profits, but through consideration of the artistic, emotional and intellectual consequences.

As socialists understand, technology is not the evil. Technology and science have their own logic, mastering the physical world in humanity’s interests. They do not develop in a vacuum, however, but in a society where the ruling class controls technology, science and their uses.

This means that the future of artificial intelligence in the film, television, music and gaming world is not an organizational or logistical question, to be determined by anonymous economic or “market” forces over which no one has any control, but a *political and social one*. Whether workers have a future depends on ending the financial oligarchy’s stranglehold over entertainment and every critical sector of the economy.

Under existing conditions, in an industry in the grip of this handful of giant conglomerates, the jobs crisis continues and deepens, threatening the livelihoods of great numbers of people. The situation will not improve without the active intervention of the workers themselves.

Over the last two years, what has become known as the “Great Contraction” in film and television has accelerated sharply.

Shoot Days (SD) in the Los Angeles film industry declined by 22 percent in the first quarter of this year compared to the same period last year, falling from 6,823 last year to 5,295 this year. In almost every category, the number of jobs available has continued to plummet. There are similar developments in other production centers, including New York, Atlanta, Vancouver and Toronto.

The television industry has seen an even greater decrease in production. As we explained in April, “Episodic television [in Los Angeles] has been especially hard hit. FilmLA points out that whereas such TV series, which it describes as ‘particularly high-value, job-producing forms of production,’ had accounted for 30 percent of all production on ‘certified stages and backlots in L.A’ in recent years, it now comprises only 20 percent, a drop by *one-third*.”

The video game industry has seen job-cutting unrivaled in its history,

and this comes even though the industry has seen its profit margins rise. Just last month, the WSWS pointed out, “The layoffs are being implemented despite increasing and robust profits for the company [Disney], prompting Reuters to assert that ‘Walt Disney quarterly results are looking like the happiest place on earth.’ If one is not an employee facing the unemployment line.”

What lies ahead in terms of the impact of AI? The January 2024 study mentioned above, commissioned by the Concept Art Association and the Animation Guild, and conducted by consulting firm CVL Economics, found that almost

two-thirds of the 300 business leaders surveyed expect GenAI to play a role in consolidating or replacing existing job titles in their business division over the next three years.

That is how the report authors arrived at the figure of 203,800 payroll jobs being affected. They further explained that since this number did not include the impact on

gig workers and freelancers, who are not tracked as robustly by U.S. administrative data and surveys, the actual number of displaced creative jobs is in fact likely to be much higher. Of the firms surveyed that primarily employ gig workers or freelancers, nearly 80% are early adopters of GenAI [generative artificial intelligence].

Such precariously situated workers, they continue,

are disproportionately vulnerable to contract work displacement compared to the population of creative workers overall. And given that the entertainment industries on average employ a greater share of gig workers compared to other sectors, the total number of affected jobs will likely be even more significant.

The report goes through the various fields, (1) film, television and animation; (2) music and sound recording; and (3) gaming, and soberly outlines the devastating “potential impacts.”

There is too much concrete material to report here, but it is possible to provide a sampling. The study suggested, for instance, that roughly one-third of film, television and animation business leaders surveyed

predict job displacement over the next three years for Sound Editors and 3D Modelers. Job titles such as Sound Designer, Compositor, and Graphic Designer were flagged as vulnerable by roughly 25% of respondents. Approximately one third placed Re-Recording Mixers, Broadcast Technicians, and Audio and Video Technicians in this category as well.

Some 55 percent of the business leaders

foresee Sound Designers facing the greatest degree of displacement over the next three years. A little over 40% of respondents considered Music Editors, Audio Technicians, and

Sound Engineers to be vulnerable as well, and roughly 33% expect Songwriters, Composers, and Studio Engineers to experience similar impacts over the next three years.

The report provides several examples of the sorts of positions that “face higher exposure to GenAI integration.” Eighty percent of early adopters of GenAI are currently using or planning to use the technology in the post-production process,

which focuses on editing and adding visual effects to finalize content. The GenAI program TrueSync, for example, can manipulate the movement of actors’ lips to accommodate dubbing in different languages. Not only was the use of this type of technology a sticking point during the negotiations between SAG-AFTRA [Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists] and AMPTP [Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers], but its proliferation is also likely to suppress demand for multilingual voice actors in emerging fields like entertainment localization.

Displacement will take place in the production process too.

In the movie *Here*, starring Tom Hanks and Robin Wright ... software developed by Metaphysic was used to “de-age” the actors, whereas, previously, hair and makeup artists or younger actors may have been employed to approximate the same ends. Similarly, GenAI is now often used in pre-production to help create images that can speed up pre-visualization, character design, and storyboarding processes, minimizing the need for the holistic skill sets offered by concept artists, illustrators, and animators.

The study envisions the destruction or adverse impact on hundreds of thousands of jobs, lives and families occurring entirely at the pleasure of the employers. Although, “to be sure ... organized labor” will play a role in shaping the environment and establishing safeguards, in the short to medium term, “the decisions about what GenAI technology will be deployed and how it will be used will be led by industry leaders and managers.”

SAG-AFTRA, the writers’ and directors’ guilds, IATSE, the Teamsters and the other entertainment unions entirely accept this proposition. The response of the unions in Southern California to this potentially catastrophic development has been reactionary and corporatist. They have formed an alliance with the studios and the state and local governments to “Keep California Rolling,” a campaign that calls for the preservation of jobs in Los Angeles and environs, while throwing the rest of the workforce in other US cities and Canada to the wolves!

The unions have demonstrated their stance in the contract negotiations and conflicts that have taken place over the past two years. A main point of contention, according to both workers and union officials, was AI and control of its use. What this meant to workers, however, and what the unions fought for and achieved were two different things.

While workers wanted to ensure that their likenesses, their work, their performances, their creativity would not be swallowed whole by or replaced with generative AI, the unions turned this into gaining empty provisions from the conglomerates over so-called informed consent.

“Informed consent” boils down to workers signing a form before allowing their likenesses, performances, etc., to be used in a given

production and possibly beyond. Essentially, this tells workers that they must sign away their livelihoods or, if they refuse “consent,” face the possibility of not working (unless of course they are A-listers).

The right to sign such a travesty is what the entertainment unions have spent the last two years negotiating behind closed doors. In fact, the unions have spent the past two years attempting to find a way to sell this to workers.

As the union officials have not and are not interested in waging an actual struggle against the conglomerates, they have not made any serious investigation and public exposure of the abuse of AI by the studio and other bosses.

Individual workers are reduced to providing anecdotes that appear with increasing frequency in the trade journals. Thus, we read about actors who give auditions and are turned down for jobs only to see their audition tapes used later in productions. Voice actors report the use of their voices in material for which they have never been paid or given their prior “informed consent.”

And then there are the incidents where the unions have agreed behind closed doors to the use and storage of workers’ replicas without even informing them of the negotiations or allowing them to vote on the matter.

The proper answer to the implementation of AI is not a futile call for the abandonment of its use but the intelligent, rational position of the vigilant, class-conscious worker: AI must be put to use for the benefit of entertainment industry workers and the population as a whole, and not the accumulation of vast wealth by financial sharks.

A first and critical step is the organization of rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracies and the big business politicians. Such committees, formed in every corner of the industry, need to link up with one another and with those in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) in the struggle for a mass movement of the working class whose goal must be the expropriation of the big capitalist conglomerates.

Apart from a movement to take AI out the hands of the corporations and put it under the control of workers themselves, its use by the employers portends exactly what workers have been expressing in interviews and social media over the last few years, devastating threats to their professions and livelihoods. The only answer is the taking of power into workers’ own hands through the democratic and socialist reorganization of society as a whole.



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