

As video game performers continue strike, SAG-AFTRA announces backdoor agreement with AI company

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Last Thursday, in Burbank, California, several hundred of the 2,500 video game performers and voice actors on strike, members of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), held a picket outside the offices of Walt Disney Studios, the entertainment giant.

The performers, many of whom provide voices and stunt work for video game characters, began their action July 26. What fuels the strike in particular is the real, plausible danger that Artificial Intelligence will be used by the corporations to eliminate their jobs entirely.

In their fight for decent wages and job protections, actors not only have to contend with rapacious, multi-billion dollar corporations such as Disney, but also the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy, which poses as a bulwark for workers, but in reality offers no serious opposition to the corporations' long-worked-out plans to cut costs by replacing workers with AI.

This was demonstrated last Thursday. Less than 24 hours before the Burbank picket, the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy announced it reached an agreement with AI startup company, Narrativ (valued at \$100 million in 2021), to harvest 160,000-plus members' voices and likeness for its database. The agreement, which rank-and-file members did not get to review, was unanimously approved by the union's Executive Committee.

The agreement reached between SAG-AFTRA and Narrativ should be a clear warning that the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy is not only willing to accept the companies' line on AI, but is more than ready to enforce its implementation.

In the new agreement between SAG-AFTRA and

Narrativ, each time a voice replica is used in the creation of a digital ad, the original voice actor is supposed to be compensated. Under the agreement, actors will reportedly have the option to refuse the use of their voice for ads that they may disagree with, such as ads promoting a certain political party or program.

"SAG-AFTRA and Narrativ are setting a new standard for the ethical use of A.I.-generated voice replicas in digital advertising," the union stated to their membership.

"Not all members will be interested in taking advantage of the opportunities that licensing their digital voice replicas might offer, and that's understandable," national executive director Duncan Crabtree-Ireland chimed in. "But for those who do, you now have a safe option."

Prominent AI industry executives praised the agreement, with Waymark CEO Alex Persky-Stern calling it a "watershed moment."

"It gives actors full control over their digital voice replicas," Persky-Stern stated in an interview with *Variety*. "They choose their rates, they specify ad preferences, and they have to give the thumbs up for every single use."

"That's consent and transparency in action. Plus, it's completely opt-in. No one's forced to participate if they're not comfortable with it. This is exactly how AI should be used..."

SAG-AFTRA must be taking their membership for fools!

Catch phrases such as "basic protections," "informed consent" and "AI guardrails" are used to misrepresent the real content of these back-door agreements between SAG-AFTRA bureaucrats and the AI companies.

As the WSWS reported last week:

By “basic protections” SAG-AFTRA simply means requiring the companies to obtain the “informed consent” of individual voice actors when using their likenesses and voices for artificial intelligence purposes.

However, as workers in every industry know, if you do not sign the “informed consent” form, you do not get to work. The union officials are playing a game of three-card monte with workers’ livelihoods, as well as the continued existence of their careers. As the AI database gets larger and larger, the original performer’s work can be subsumed into a much larger whole. This will make it more and more difficult for any individual worker to prove that his or her effort or likeness is being used and therefore to establish eligibility for compensation.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several actors on the picket Thursday about their ongoing struggle and broader issues.

A commercial actress with over 20 years of experience in the industry expressed concerns that workers were not being fairly compensated for their hard work.

She also doubted the ability of huge corporations to safeguard performers’ personal data, especially their voices.

“Our social security numbers were recently breached in a hack,” she said. “If even those aren’t safe on a database controlled by the government, what is to say that these digital voices and identities won’t be stolen?”

John, a voice actor for the last 10 years, stated that he’d “be lying” if he claimed to be in a better position today than when he started working in the industry.

“It’s almost like everyone nowadays is expected to be a millionaire or have multiple sources of income,” John said.

“You are selling products online, whether it’s coffee mugs from China, or jewelry, or digital products like pamphlets or menus. Everyone is expected to do work,

but the problem is, that work doesn’t always guarantee results.”

John stated that he’s not opposed to using AI to fix slight mistakes or errors, as long as the actors have control.

“I think AI would be great for that,” he said. “Imagine a performance that is so awesome, but it’s just one tiny little syllable, that one tiny word; or imagine, a musical instrument that was out of tune for one note throughout an amazing orchestra.”

“Just a tiny bit of adjustment could make everything go smoothly. That’s what AI should be used for.”

The willingness of rank and file members to fight against the threat that AI poses to the future of their profession stands in contrast to the cynical disregard and deceitful conduct of the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy. Whatever union officials may say in public, their actions prove that their only concern is the smooth transition to AI in conjunction with the conglomerates, at the expense of the jobs and conditions of their members.



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