

SAG-AFTRA has no strategy to defeat ravages of AI and other technologies

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As the strike by video game performers enters its ninth week, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) continues to chip away at the determination of workers to fight through signing more interim agreements.

In reality, SAG-AFTRA has fully accepted the fact that Artificial Intelligence (AI) will destroy thousands of jobs and entire professions, and is simply looking for a face-saving way of ending the current strike. Isolating and demoralizing the strikers are part of that strategy. The interim agreements are an element of the same process, a means of calling off the strike piecemeal, so to speak.

On September 19, 150-200 people participated in the union's once a week picket, this time at Disney Character Voices, in Burbank, California, one of the companies affected by the walkout.

Zeke Alton, a member of the SAG-AFTRA negotiating committee, reported there were now more than 90 corporations that had signed on to the SAG-AFTRA interim agreements. This translates to more than 90 corporations where video game performers are working during a strike entering its third month.

Alton insisted,

We're over 90! People say, "We don't get enough information." So let me tell you, we're winning. How do we know that we're winning? They're changing their tactics, they're shifting, they're trying dirty tricks. We're seeing all of this. You're seeing video games come out being cast as commercials. You're seeing people get direct offers with, "We'll give you our own AI protections, trust us, we'll do the right thing." It's evidence that what we're doing is what a strike is supposed to do, which is to disrupt the work, to get them to come back to the table to make a real bargain.

Alton did not explain how interim agreements, in regard to which workers have no input or vote, "disrupts the work." In fact, it does no such thing. It "disrupts" the strike, removing performers from the once a week, one studio at a time picket line, dividing them between those on strike and those still working, and isolating those still on strike. It should be noted that having workers work

while a strike is ongoing is what used to be known as scabbing.

Alton proceeded to proclaim,

And just so you know, as this continues, and as we see them continue to try and shift tactics to get around what we are doing, they are going to come back to the table. Because the 90-plus companies out there that continues to grow every day have agreed and do recognize that what we're asking for is reasonable. And the public at-large is starting to realize that they are going to get what we get.

The reason that 90-plus companies have signed onto these interim agreements is because these agreements force them to give up ... nothing. They merely require the informed consent of video game performers to the use of AI in their projects. As the WSWs has stated on more than one occasion, informed consent is largely meaningless, certainly for lesser-known performers. In the vast majority of cases, actors/performers who do not sign consent clauses will not get the job, period.

At the Disney picket, the WSWs interviewed a young character voice actor who began working in the industry in 2016. He described his concerns in the following way:

I'd say a big part of it is AI protections and just making sure that our first job isn't our last job. It's one thing if you're remixing a piece of media, or whatever, but it's another thing when you're literally just going into an algorithm, and then that algorithm just steals someone's likeness or voice.

He also said that

It doesn't have the insight level of creativity or practice at all really. But you know, as a tool, we should find a way to work with this. But it shouldn't replace the entire team. Animators have been going through a similar struggle. And if and when they strike, we definitely need to join them out there as well, just because they're in it as much as we are.

This is a salient point. The Animation Guild, with 5,000 members, is currently in negotiations, which its officials term “existential.” The guild’s contract expired on July 31, but the union and management have extended it until November 1. Animation is expected to be particularly hard hit by AI. The *Hollywood Reporter* recently commented that the major film industry figure “Jeffrey Katzenberg, the co-founder of DreamWorks and former chairman of Walt Disney Studios, has predicted that generative AI could eradicate 90 percent of animation artist jobs.” And further: “In a sobering statistic, The Animation Guild disclosed on July 31 that it estimates, through research and internal surveys, that about one third of its working members have been laid off in the past year.”

Another video game striker, who defended the union’s interim agreements, commented on Thursday that

We are asking them to say you have to be specific about the data you take, and by data, that is the recording of our voice. The MoCap, which is called motion capture, is scanning our face, our body movement. That’s all part of us. That’s part of our performance, that’s part of our movement. That is how we act. That is our instinct. The interim agreement is essentially the agreement that we hope every gaming company will take.

We want them to agree that this data is not just data. They’re part of us. They’re part of the performance, which means they have to treat those data with respect. They cannot abuse it, they cannot use it on other projects, they have to treat these things as a part of us. Because what’s going to happen, what’s been happening, is they take all these data and they throw it into these AI machines to recreate the performance. Yeah, and then they incorporate it into the data.

So we’re making it very specific in these interim agreements. Again, the essential agreement that we hope everyone will take is that you have to treat these data carefully. You have to tell us exactly how long you’re going to use it, what you’re going to use it for ... What we’re asking for is reasonable. ... These people called stunts, they just do body movements. Like if you play games, like players roll, you see the characters in the video games rolling on the ground, fighting, that stuff. Right now, they are forced to work eight hours straight with no breaks. The interim agreement puts in a mandatory break. It’s reasonable.

These demands are more than reasonable, but performers should not be naïve about what the companies will do, once they have the foot in the door. There is nothing in any of the union agreements that protects workers from the ravages of technologies in the hands of giant conglomerates, whose sole concern is profit. There is no way to get around the problem of the stranglehold of these corporations. As long as they rule, AI and other technologies will only be used to cut costs and destroy jobs.

As for breaks, as the interim agreements themselves state, breaks were provided for almost 20 years ago: “Effective July 1, 2005, Employer shall provide voice-over performers who are engaged to work in excess of one (1) hour with a five (5) minute rest period for each hour of recording.” The fact that video game performers still do not have breaks demonstrates clearly that the SAG-AFTRA bureaucracy does not bother to enforce the provisions for workers’ protections that are already included in their contracts.

SAG-AFTRA’s Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, who at \$1.02 million a year is the ninth-highest paid union official in the US, also spoke briefly at the picket. He remarked that

Someone right behind me made this bracelet for us. It says, “Play fair,” and that’s what we’re telling these companies to do. They’ve got to play fair. That’s why we’re out here. It’s Disney, it’s Warner Brothers, but it’s all of the others too and that’s what we’re here sending them that message.

Our committee is strong; our members are strong. We are going to get the contract provisions we deserve. It is going to happen. And by the way, how about the 80 games that have signed the MTR agreement [interim agreements]? How about White Speed LA? This is where it’s going. This is where the industry is going. And these companies are isolated and more isolated until they make the deal.

For the union leaders up becomes down, left becomes right, and all that is needed for workers to enter the kingdom of heaven is for the bosses to just play fair. But they do not play fair, they never have, and they never will, which is why workers have always had to fight.

The only ones being “isolated” by the series of interim agreements, which send workers back to work during a strike, are the performers themselves, including the ones working at corporations that have signed these interim agreements. The latter do not provide protections from AI and also do not contain decent wages, benefits or residuals. This is because not only do the corporations not play fair, but the union officials who live like the employers also do not play fair, by pushing through agreements without a vote that do not meet even the most basic needs of video game workers.

There is only one way forward for workers and that is through the creation of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracy, as well as the two parties of big business. Otherwise the union officialdom will continue to strangle every struggle that erupts.



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