

ZeniMax video game workers strike, demanding remote work and an end to outsourcing

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Hundreds of Microsoft video game workers went out on a one-day strike Wednesday against company subsidiary ZeniMax Studios (which owns Bethesda, publisher of *Starfield*, *Fallout 76* and *The Elder Scrolls*), at locations in Texas and Maryland.

The eight-hour work stoppage was called by ZeniMax Workers United (ZWU-CWA), affiliated with the Communication Workers of America. The union explained the strike was an effort to force Microsoft to the bargaining table over remote working and the giant corporation's continuing practice of outsourcing quality assurance (QA) work.

The strike follows the call of QA workers at Activision (another subsidiary of Microsoft), also members of the CWA, for a remote work option at rallies held in Texas, Minnesota and California at the end of October.

ZWU-CWA, comprising over 300 QA workers, was formed in January 2023. This was followed by the unionization of more than 600 QA workers at Activision in March of that year. ZWU-CWA was further augmented when developers joined in June, in hopes the union would help protect them against the layoffs sweeping the industry.

In fact, Microsoft has been one of the industry's prime movers in implementing job cuts. In January 2024 it slashed 1,900 people from its gaming workforce, and purged an additional 650 September 12. Three days later, Microsoft Gaming CEO Phil Spencer announced another 650 support and corporate positions would be eliminated.

These layoffs come after a frenzy of major acquisitions by Microsoft over the last few years, not the least of which were the purchase of ZeniMax in

March 2021 for \$8.1 billion and Activision in October 2023 for \$75.4 billion (the largest such deal in industry history).

The attack on jobs in the video game industry has mirrored downsizing in other industries.

In the period January 2023 to September 2024, more than 23,000 people lost jobs in the video game field. Only 10,000 of those job losses occurred in 2023, indicating the pace of layoffs has increased. In the past year alone over 30 gaming studios have shut down, laying off all their employees.

Video game workers voted to bring in the union in an effort to oppose the unrelenting attacks of management. However, the CWA made clear its class collaboration and cowardice from the outset.

As PCGamer reports,

Microsoft said when the union vote passed that “we look forward to engaging in good faith negotiations as we work towards a collective bargaining agreement,” prompting CWA president Chris Shelton to compliment the company's approach to worker unionization, saying it “should serve as a model for the industry and as a blueprint for regulators.”

The CWA is interested in the immediate dues money and getting its foot in the door in the industry, so it can bring in additional dues money. The rights and interests of the workers involved are of no interest to the union bureaucracy, which functions as an arm of management.

The November 13 one-day strike, itself an entirely ineffective method of struggle, was ostensibly called to force management to come to the negotiating table over remote work and outsourcing of QA. The ZWU-CWA doesn't even go through the motions of opposing outsourcing, declaring,

We understand that outsourcing has a place in testing and development. The issue is that Microsoft is taking action without notice or negotiation with our union. They are also effectively replacing in-house QA work with outsourced work.

In other words, the union simply wants to be informed about outsourcing beforehand. All the better to sell it to workers, much as they sold their tentative agreement (TA) on artificial intelligence, which does nothing to protect workers from the predations of management in regard to the use of AI.

According to the union,

The historic tentative agreement on AI 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.

Workers need to understand this is all hot air. Management has agreed to "notify" the union, and even "bargain" with it, about AI's devastating impact. There isn't the hint of struggle in the CWA's language or actions. The union officialdom will stand by passively as entire crafts and professions disappear.

No doubt, there are illusions about the unions and what they will do, helped along by various "lefts." One worker was quoted by *Insider Gaming* as saying, "It is clear that every worker can benefit from bringing

democracy into the workplace and securing a protected voice on the job. We're thrilled to get down to brass tacks and win a fair contract, proving that our unity is a source of real power to positively shape our working conditions, our lives, and the company as a whole."

Democracy and democratic forms of struggle are the precise opposite of what the CWA and the rest of the AFL-CIO unions stand for. Union officials earn salaries that put them in the same social bracket as corporate executives. They think and act like members of the social elite. They live in a different world from the rank and file.

Negotiations, when they are held, go on behind closed doors, with no minutes taken or distributed. Demands are kept vague or a complete secret, and everything the union eventually presents to workers will be labeled a "historic win."

All workers know that there is strength in organization, which is why the union was turned to in the first place. But what kind of organization?

Workers should be asking: Why was a strike called for only one day instead of until demands were met? Why were only ZeniMax workers called out and not those at Activision, who face the same issues, are members of the same union and work for the same parent company, Microsoft? There is currently a strike by video game performers that has been ongoing since July. Has there been any attempt to link up those two struggles by the union hierarchy?

If video game workers want to better their conditions and defend jobs, they will have to take matters into their own hands by forming democratic rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracy and the two parties of big business. These committees will need to link up with and help to create other committees within and without the industry as workers everywhere confront similar conditions, and in many cases, the very same bosses.



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