

Video game industry strike in US now second-longest in screen actors' history

By Kevin Martinez
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Voice actors in the video game industry have now been on strike since October 21 against selected companies, including Activision, Electronic Arts, Disney, and Warner Brothers. The 99-day strike, called by the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), is now the longest in SAG history.

The walkout is over pay, residuals and work conditions. It has now surpassed the three-month strike in 1980 when actors and management were involved in a battle over contract terms for pay TV and videocassettes. That bitter strike occurred just a year before President Ronald Reagan (the former president of SAG who aided the anticommunist witch-hunt in the union in 1947-52) fired 13,000 striking air traffic controllers, initiating a decade of government-backed union busting and wage cutting by US corporations.

The longest walkout by SAG and AFTRA was the 183-day strike in 2000 against the advertising industry over commercial work compensation for basic cable and Internet. The current strike is the first in the history of the video gaming industry, the first actors' strike in 17 years and the first since SAG and AFTRA merged in 2012.

Despite the intransigence of the giant media conglomerates, the union is isolating the struggle and has limited it to toothless appeals to management. SAG-AFTRA only ordered its members to stop working at 11 companies, two of which have since gone out of business since last year. The last time the union held a picket against one of the companies, Insomniac Games, was last November. A strike rally and token picket will be held on February 2.

The main issue in contention is residuals. The union wants the companies to either pay an upfront bonus or backend residuals for successful video games.

Management has refused to budge on this question.

The union has asked for "full-scale payment" for every 500,000 video game units sold, with a maximum of four secondary payments if a game sells two million copies and every two million more. In addition, the union wants the industry to reduce the recording time for "vocally stressful" sessions to two hours, instead of four, to prevent an actor from hurting their voice.

The union is also asking for greater safety regulations for stunt work, as well as greater transparency. One of the demands is that workers be informed of the title and subject of the project they are working on, which is standard practice within the entertainment industry.

The companies reportedly offered a nine percent wage hike and additional compensation of \$950 per game based on the number of voice acting sessions an actor performed for each game. Management knows fully well that such meager concessions will not impact the massive amount of profits they will make.

The unions have limited their strike to only video games that have gone into production after February 17, 2015. The union has blocked any common struggle with workers throughout the entertainment industry who face similar conditions at work and are struggling to keep a roof over their heads as well.

In a letter to SAG-AFTRA members, Gabrielle Carteris, president of the union, implored workers to "send management the message that resolving the strike will benefit everyone." Workers are encouraged to attend the February 2 rally, the latest in a line of such protest, while the unions continue to promote the Democratic Party whose anti-working class policies paved the way for the Trump administration, the most right-wing government in US history.

In a related development, the Directors Guild of America (DGA) approved a new contract with the

Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) that would increase wages by a mere 2.5 percent the first year and three percent in the second and third years of the agreement. These increases, which have been hailed by the union as an economic advancement for its members, do not begin to keep up with inflation and the soaring cost of rent and other living expenses.

The current master contract between SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP will expire on June 30, 2017, and the Writers Guild of America's contract will expire on May 1. The SAG-AFTRA national board approved its negotiating package with AMPTP on January 21. This new package will ensure that workers' demands are limited at the very start of negotiations.

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