Voice actors along with SAG-AFTRA negotiations discuss the actors’ strike and the threat of AI at San Diego Comic Con 2023. From left: Linsay Rousseau, Tim Friedlander, Ashly Burch, Zeke Alton, Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, Cindy Jones.

Han says the messaging and visibility of strikes by high-profile unions like SAG-AFTRA and the WGA are likely inspiring workers across all industries. “They hear the news of writers striking in Hollywood and think, ‘Maybe it’s time for us to speak up.’” In some cases, the technology scours the online landscape, takes content, runs it through an algorithm and generates an amalgamation. Alton says there needs to be more transparency of what those machines are doing because it affects the entire labor force. “If we can’t see into the machine, then we have no idea of whose id’s and work and training are being taken for free, without consent and compensation, and turned into something that makes money for a billionaire sitting somewhere at a retreat. So that’s why this is important to us.”

The union members know the technology is here to stay, but they believe that the unmitigated and uncompensated use of machines to supplant human labor is not an inevitability. “When you look at things like the assembly line that we’ve seen over the last century, that changed the world, that can go one way or the other,” says Alton. “It can be a tool to allow the population to rise, or it can be a tool in the hands of the masters to bring the wealth to a single person.”

As to making the decision to strike, “That kind of drastic action will bring more attention to the public. And, usually, the public view is a kind of weapon, a powerful tool, that workers can wield,” says Han. “But the strategy is kind of a last resort.”

While striking may be a last resort, when faced with something they see as an existential threat, many workers are not backing down. “The strategy and commander, Alton opts for the military metaphor. “We talk in analogies. It’s like the military metaphor. ‘We talk in an inflection point in history right now. We can choose to fight and die on that hill, or we will be summarily executed there. That’s the only choice we have.’”

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