

Museum of Modern Art workers on strike in New York

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A union representing about 260 staff workers has been on strike against the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City since April 28. The central issues involve salaries, healthcare, the threat of layoffs and union rights. The old contract expired October 31. This is the first major strike at the museum since 1973.

The Professional and Administrative Staff Association (PASTA), which is Local 2110 of the United Auto Workers, represent the strikers. They comprise a varied workforce of administrative assistants, archivists, curators, conservators, graphic artists, librarians, salespeople, secretaries, visitors assistants and writers.

PASTA is one of six unions in the museum. The members of the other five bargaining units are continuing to work.

The workers have rejected the museum's offer of a 3 percent raise a year for three years, and is demanding 5 percent for the first year and 4 percent for the subsequent years in a five-year contract. The strikers believe that this demand is more than justified considering the very low wages they receive, which they say are even lower than what is paid in other museums for comparable work. The median wage for the employees is \$28,000 a year, and the starting salary for 40 of the workers is \$17,000 a year.

Furthermore, the union says that the museum is refusing to maintain the employees' health insurance and other benefits. PASTA maintains that MoMA has been very successful in its investments, and could easily afford a decent salary hike while maintaining benefits. The workers feel that their wages are being held down while the managers are more than amply compensated.

Another issue provoking the strike is job security. The museum is undergoing a \$650 million expansion

project for at least two years, and is planning relocate to Queens from its present location in Manhattan during that period of time. The union fears that the jobs of many of its members will be lost, and wants a guarantee that the workers will be able to return to their positions when the project is completed. The union is seeking a five-year contract in order to ensure that any job security clause will not expire before the project has been completed.

PASTA wants the museum to agree that all new workers be required to either join the union or, if they don't join, be required to pay an equivalent monetary amount of the dues as an agency fee that goes to the union. At the same time, PASTA has filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board charging the museum with not bargaining in good faith by attempting to bypass the union and negotiate with individual employees.

The strike has forced the museum to cancel a fundraising event starring the singer Sheryl Crow. MoMA officials said that they did not want Ms. Crow or the ticketholders to have to cross a picket line, and refunded 450 tickets with prices ranging from \$500 to \$1,000 each.

Other than this event, some workers on the picket line have stated that it is difficult for them to judge how many people they have managed to discourage from going into the museum. MoMA officials are maintaining that the museum is running normally, and that 90 of the 260 workers that are represented by the bargaining unit are working. Union officials dispute the claim that the strike is having no effect on the institution and say that only 30 workers are crossing the picket line.

One striker, Ela Respina, a photographer with one year at the museum, said, "Our salaries are quite low.

MoMA is penny pitching on our wages. The museum has made a lot of money in the last couple of years, and this is on public record.

“One problem is that all the other unions have contracts that expire at different times, and so they are working. The guards have a no-strike clause in their contract, the art handlers have a no-strike clause, the operation and housekeeping union has a no-strike clause, and so on. By contract they cannot go on a sympathy strike and join us.

“I work here because MoMA is a premier institution. It has a first-rate collection, and enormous resources. I have learned a lot since I have been here. People in the arts profession love what they do, and are not working primarily for the money. For example, my colleague standing here with me on this picket line has a Ph.D., and she makes less money than the guards.”

Danny Fermon is a museum librarian who has been working for 30 years and is on the union's negotiating committee. He said, “A lot of librarians who are not in the unions and work in law firms, make a lot more money than a librarian for a museum or for the public library. I have a masters degree in music, and a masters in Library Studies. After 30 years on this job, I make \$37,000. I believe that what they pay the workers here is the lowest of any museum in New York.

“I am here because I like the work that I do, and the people that I work with. Also, there are certain health and pension benefits that I get here that I would not get in a firm.

“We are handing out flyers urging people not to visit the museum. A lot of people do not go in, but it is hard to tell just how much of an overall effect we are having. However, Tuesday night the singer Sheryl Crow canceled a benefit that was scheduled to take place here because she will not cross our picket line.

“One of the most important of our demands is for a closed union shop. There are 260 staff personnel, but only 180 are in the union. Most of the nonunion workers are crossing the picket line, but some have joined the strike. There are also about a dozen union members who are scabbing.”



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