

Museum of Modern Art strike in New York enters second month

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About 260 staff workers at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City have been on strike for more than four weeks. The Professional and Administrative Staff Association (PASTA), which is Local 2110 of the United Auto Workers, represents a wide variety of staff personnel at MoMA, including archivists, librarians and secretaries. According to a union spokesperson the two sides remain very far apart on the central issues of job security, wages, health benefits and an agency shop.

A central dispute in the conflict involves the museum's planned \$650 million expansion program, which will mean closing the institution at its current location in Manhattan for about two years. As the rebuilding project is in progress the museum will relocate to Queens, requiring a smaller workforce. The union is asking for severance pay for the workers who lose their jobs, as well as the right to be rehired when the reconstruction work is completed.

Striking MoMA workers feel they are being asked to sacrifice their livelihoods to help pay for the cost of the museum expansion. Entry-level workers currently make only \$17,000 per year, and median yearly earnings are \$28,000. A union representative has pointed out that James Gara, the chief financial officer at MoMA, has received a 35 percent salary hike over the last two years.

Another central issue in the strike is the union's demand for an agency shop, under which all new employees would be required to either join the union or pay the equivalent of union dues. Currently, about one third of the 260 staff employees are not union members. The museum is claiming that about 40 percent of the 260 museum employees, including some union members, have crossed the picket line, although the union disputes this high figure.

There are six different unions at MoMA, but only PASTA lacks an agency clause in its contract. The employees in the other five unions have different contract expiration dates and are continuing to work during the strike. A number of workers on the picket line have expressed the feeling that MoMA wants to bust the union, and that if they succeed the other five bargaining units will be confronted with the same threat.

Museum officials are maintaining that they are running a normal operation, although the union claims that attendance is at the lowest in the institution's history. PASTA officials also maintain that the picket line has had a major impact on the museum's educational program. According to a union spokesperson, 65 percent of school educational programs have been cancelled because many teachers have refused to cross the picket line. However, it has been difficult for strikers to gauge just how many people they have been able to discourage visiting the museum on a daily basis.

A worker on the picket line who has worked in the visitors services department of the museum for about one year told the WSW: "MoMA pays ridiculously low wages. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in photography. When I was in college I worked at Starbucks [coffee shop] to help get me through school. You know, I made more money with them than I do at the museum.

"However, although they pay me only \$17,000 per year, they also help finance my continuing education. I am here because I like to work with people who know about art. In this job I am in constant contact with art. In carrying out my responsibilities, I not only know about all the lectures, I also attend them, although I am not required to do so. Through this continuous

interaction, ideas can flourish.

"I not only sell tickets to the customers, I can speak intelligently to them about all the shows at MoMA. I can also explain to the customer what is happening in all the other museums because this is information that I acquire as a result of my interest in the arts.

"I am good at what I do because I love the subject. The museum is getting a pretty good bargain for what they pay me."



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