

# Boston: Museum of Fine Arts victimizes veteran worker

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The Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston has fired a veteran member of the Museum Independent Security Union (MISU) after refusing his request for a four-day unpaid leave. The action is the latest effort on the part of MFA management to reduce staffing and eliminate flexible working hours for the museum's approximately 95 guards, making it impossible for many union members to keep their jobs.

The MISU has been holding informational pickets outside the MFA to build public support for the fight to defend their jobs and working conditions. While the museum has seen record attendance for the current exhibit "Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer," MFA management has shown nothing but contempt for the workers whose job it is to protect the museum's precious artwork and interact with the visiting public.

At a protest outside the museum on Saturday, MISU members and supporters distributed leaflets headlined "Museum Fires Employee for Being a Responsible Father." John Powhida, who has been a guard at the museum for 15 years, is also a well-known and award-winning musician in the Boston area. The guards are demanding that he be immediately reinstated with back pay.

Evan Henderson, MISU president, told the WSWS, "John requested four unpaid days off to assist his family in a museum-sponsored trip to Korea." John's wife, an Asian works on paper conservator at the museum, was required to go on the trip to research silk.

Henderson said, "He went on the trip because they have a one-and-a-half year-old daughter who was going with the mother and his wife is also five months pregnant. He asked for four unpaid days off and was denied the four unpaid days."

While on the trip, Powhida received a termination

letter via email from Malcolm Hanson, assistant director of protective services at the MFA. Powhida responded after receiving the email: "I loved the museum and my job protecting the art and helping visitors. ... Yesterday was an emotional day for us and we are both stunned at upper management's lack of empathy."

MFA management terminated Powhida despite offers from other guards, including Henderson, to cover the four days leave he requested. The museum made the spurious claim that Powhida could not go on the trip because they are understaffed.

"But there's been a hiring freeze for a year and a half," Henderson said. "The reason why anything could be considered a hardship for the museum is their own fault for not hiring more guards." Since the hiring freeze was implemented, about a dozen guard jobs have been lost.

Powhida's firing has provoked a flurry of angry letters on the MFA's Facebook page from supporters of the fired guard and museum patrons. In response, museum management released a statement concluding with this glib comment: "Working collaboratively with the MISU, and mindful of the needs and welfare of our guards, our intention is an amicable resolution that leads to positive changes for the Museum and its staff."

Henderson said the reality is that guards have been forced to quit because they are unable to work with the schedules that have been implemented in the new year. Management is seeking to shift to what some guards refer to as a "militarized" approach to museum security, with more reliance on security technologies and video surveillance at the expense of personnel.

"They now bring in three guards from Securitas every single day here," Henderson said. "It's the same people every single time so they pretty much have a full-time

job here at the museum, while we struggle for seven years before even being considered for full-time work.”

Management is seeking to force guards out and reduce the staff by implementing eight-and-a-half hour days on a non-flexible basis. Many workers—including single parents, students and teachers at the museum’s school—who are unable to abide by the new schedule are being forced to quit. With the hiring freeze in place, they are not being replaced.

Museum guards note that visitors can walk through multiple galleries without seeing one guard. This not only places the irreplaceable artwork at risk, but diminishes the public’s interaction with guards, many of whom have worked for decades at the museum and are knowledgeable about the collections.

While management is seeking to impose its vindictive agenda on the guards, the MFA has had a banner year, with more than 1,227,000 visitors in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2015. The value of its endowment as of June 2015 was \$597 million, an 8 percent growth over the previous year, with a budget surplus of \$2.7 million.



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