

Boston Museum of Fine Arts workers hold one-day strike

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About 200 workers at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston held a one-day strike November 17, protesting pay freezes, inequality and a lack of guaranteed benefits. The workers are members of the MFA Union, which includes most of the museum's staff, including curatorial and administrative professionals, technology staff and front-facing workers.

The MFA Union is currently negotiating its first contract with the MFA. The museum's current offer does not guarantee health benefits and freezes pay in its first two years, followed by a 1.75 percent raise in its final year.

With inflation currently above 6 percent, and with workers already having had their pay frozen during and before the pandemic, this represents a significant attack on cultural workers' living standards. According to the MFA Union, average pay for their membership is \$53,400 per year, while MFA Director Matthew Teitelbaum makes 19 times that at just under \$1 million.

This average pay must be taken with a grain of salt. For one, due to the diversity of the union's membership, many of its members, especially front-facing staff, make far less. Moreover, Boston is an expensive city in which to live.

Workers voted to unionize in November 2020, shortly after the MFA reopened during the coronavirus pandemic. When the pandemic began, the MFA furloughed 314 staff (most of its workforce) and then "reorganized" by laying off 57 employees and getting 56 others to accept an early retirement.

The MFA was far from unique in its pandemic response. A June 2021 report from Americans for the Arts partially documented the cultural devastation wrought by the pandemic, with nonprofit arts and

culture organizations losing \$17.3 billion in just over a year.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported at the time:

The statistics are mind-numbing, but revealing: some 46 percent of arts and culture organizations have laid off or furloughed workers. More than a third of this group had more than 50 percent of their staff affected. Less than half expect to return to pre-pandemic employment levels, and not until 2022 or beyond at that. Arts employment as a whole is still down 25 percent from its level before the pandemic. Many positions are never coming back.

The effect on artists and cultural workers has been immense, with many leaving the field altogether. The long-term consequences for cultural life in the United States and internationally will be dire.

Thus, MFA workers are fighting not just for themselves but against a wholesale attack on workers' living standards and their right to culture, which the pandemic exacerbated but did not cause.

They also found, despite the time-limited nature of their strike, significant support. WBUR reports that truck drivers and tram conductors "honked their horns in solidarity," while a group of art students drew sketches of the strikers rather than the artworks inside the museum.

The WSWS spoke to Tufts University students, whose School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) is located next to and affiliated with the MFA. They had come out to support the strike. They said there was

immense support for the strike at the SMFA, and that similar issues faced the staff there.

Despite the determination of workers to fight—expressed in the fact that the strike authorization vote passed with 96 percent in support—and their potential support from among workers and youth in the area, the MFA Union, which is affiliated with Local 2110 of the United Auto Workers (UAW), does not have a strategy for victory.

The union limited the strike to one day and has not publicly released the demands it is fighting for in specific terms, no doubt so they can present anything above the museum's outrageous initial offer as a "win" for MFA workers.

It is also isolating its members from the broader working class. According to the MFA, its workforce is 71 percent unionized (including workers in two unions outside the MFA Union), and it was able to operate Wednesday with about 100 employees, likely including at least some unionized workers. Despite workers' militancy, they were not able to shut down the MFA.

Moreover, UAW Local 2110 is an amalgamated local of cultural, educational and clerical workers, mostly in New York City. Another UAW local in the Boston area is the Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU), which called off a second strike this semester and limited the earlier strike to only three days, and is now trying to impose a new tentative agreement on its thousands of members. The UAW has made no effort to coordinate these struggles.

Nor has it coordinated the actions of MFA workers with the many cultural workers it nominally represents in New York City, including workers at the Museum of Modern Art, the Tenement Museum, the New-York Historical Society and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, as well as at publishing houses and among other graduate workers at New York University and Columbia University, the latter of whom are on strike at the moment.

Over 10,000 other UAW members are on strike at Deere, the major agricultural machinery company. The role that the UAW has played there has been one of the clearest expressions of the anti-worker nature of the organizations that go by the name "union" today, with the UAW starving members of strike pay and forcing them to vote for yet a third time on a rotten concessions deal. The vote, which is still being tabulated as of this

writing, took place the same day as the MFA strike.

Despite claims, including by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and its affiliated Cultural Workers United (CWU), that the existing unions represent the way forward for cultural workers, the experience at the MFA as well as the entire experience of the pandemic makes it clear that workers face not only intractable management but the corporatized unions as their adversaries.

Workers at the MFA can and must win decent working conditions. To do so, however, they must take the struggle out of the hands of the UAW and turn toward the working class in Boston, across the US and internationally. This requires building a rank-and-file committee to put forward and genuinely fight for workers' demands, and a new political perspective based on socialism. Those interested in taking this fight forward should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* at wsws.org/workers.



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