

Workers at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art plan one-day strike

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About 100 workers at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) plan to conduct a one-day strike on Friday, August 19. Nearly all workers (96 percent) supported the action in a recent vote, and they plan to picket in front of the museum during visiting hours. The workers are fighting for a living wage in one of the country's most expensive states.

MASS MoCA is one of the major art museums of Massachusetts. Ongoing exhibits at the museum feature works by the conceptual artist Sol LeWitt, light and space artist James Turrell and German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer.

About two-thirds of the MASS MoCA workers make an hourly wage of \$15.50. This amount is well below a living wage for the area, according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) living wage calculator. The museum is in North Adams, Massachusetts, in the northwest part of the state, and many of the workers live nearby.

The striking workers are members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2110, which they voted to join last summer. Local 2110 is a large amalgamated local based in New York comprised of dozens of bargaining units, including museum workers, the publishing industry and college employees. Among these are workers at the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney as well as publisher HarperCollins, now in the midst of a contract battle.

Contract negotiations at MoCA began soon after unionization and have dragged on ever since.

UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman issued the following message in support of the striking workers, "Every worker at MASS MoCA has the right to a family-sustaining wage and benefits," Lehman told the WWS. "What they don't have under the leadership of the UAW bureaucracy is a fight that will realize their rights in practice. A one-day strike and isolationist tactics will not get workers what is owed them. We need to raise the level of the fight far beyond that and we need a workers' organization willing to back that kind of fight. We don't have it now, but it can be built with rank-and-file committees of workers on every

floor."

MASS MoCA responded to the strike announcement with open hostility. "We believe it is highly inappropriate for the Union to threaten Mass MoCA's public mission and programs as a negotiating tactic for bargaining power," wrote Kristy Edmunds, the museum's director, in an email to employees as reported by the *Boston Globe*. "The Museum cannot agree to terms that will diminish our operational sustainability, upend vital partnerships, reduce our public programs or fundamentally change our creative workplace culture," she continued, indicating the museum's hard line.

MASS MoCA appears to have been antagonistic toward the union from the beginning. A UAW official alleged that after workers joined the union, the museum did not give them the regular annual raise that it gave to nonunion employees. Workers' outrage forced the museum to grant the raise retroactively.

To win their struggle, MoCA workers must break out of the isolation being imposed by the UAW and fight to mobilize broader sections of workers and the public to defend their right to culture. The poverty wages received by museum workers are part of a broader assault on culture, that has intensified during the pandemic.

This is true as well in Massachusetts, where the Democratic Party controls most levels of government. Support for museums, libraries, orchestras has been cut to the bone or eliminated while art programs in schools have been the first on the chopping block to free up funds for tax handouts to the super rich.

MASS MoCA itself is a nonprofit that relies on funding from foundations and wealthy donors. Admission is \$20, a steep price for workers, far more than the hourly wage for many.

Workers must insist that museums and other vital cultural institutions be fully funded and free to the public. The right to the vast cultural heritage of mankind is not a luxury, but a necessity for the development of fully rounded and functional human beings.

MASS MoCA workers need and deserve higher wages. The museum is offering \$16 per hour without guaranteed raises. UAW negotiators are demanding an hourly wage of \$18 for the first year of the contract, along with raises in 2023 and 2024 that bring the wage “closer to \$20 per hour.” But this proposal, too, is woefully inadequate.

An economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research calculated last year that the minimum wage would be \$23 per hour if it had kept pace with productivity growth. This calculation was made before the recent surge of inflation, which is now at 8.5 percent annually.

The MIT living wage calculator estimates that a worker living near the museum with an unemployed partner and no children needs an hourly wage of \$26.66 to survive. A single worker with one child needs an hourly wage of \$37.65. These wages are obviously significantly higher than either the museum or the UAW are proposing.

The contract settlement for employees at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston earlier this summer was just a 5 percent raise, which is a de facto pay cut when inflation is considered. In 2023 and 2024, raises will be even worse: 3 percent.

From the outset, the UAW has followed its standard playbook of dragging on negotiations and isolating workers in order to wear down their resistance to management’s demands. First, the union forced workers to labor without a contract for a year before even holding a strike vote, abandoning the traditional slogan of “no contract, no work.”

Now, despite workers’ clear willingness to fight, the UAW has limited the strike to one day. This tactic is intended to allow workers to let off steam, not to pressure the museum in any meaningful way. Last month, the UAW did the same thing to workers at publisher HarperCollins, who also belong to Local 2110.

UAW officials also have claimed that the museum is not negotiating “in good faith.” This is a diversionary tactic aimed at deflecting attention from the main issue, the lack of a decent contract offer. When the parties reach a sellout deal, the union suddenly announces the company’s return to “good faith” negotiations and unilaterally calls off or ends the strike or other job actions. Workers are then pressured to ratify an agreement that fails to meet their needs.

Time and again, the UAW has betrayed workers and helped the companies. In June, workers at auto parts manufacturer Ventra in Evart, Michigan, rejected a UAW-backed contract by 95 percent and voted to strike by 98 percent. Instead of calling a strike, the UAW conducted back-room negotiations with the company and ultimately presented workers with a contract that was little different from the one they’d rejected.

In Greenville, Michigan, workers at auto parts company

Tenneco have been on the job without a contract since the beginning of the pandemic. The UAW insisted on extending the old contract to protect the company’s interests, which it prioritized above those of its own members. Workers voted by 92 percent to authorize a strike, but the union is keeping them on the job without any information about negotiations.

The UAW bureaucracy has been exposed as a viper’s nest of corruption. No fewer than 12 former UAW officers, including two national presidents, have been jailed on federal charges of taking bribes, embezzling union funds and racketeering. A court-appointed monitor recently found that current UAW President Ray Curry had obstructed an investigation into union corruption and covered up ongoing criminal activity.

But the UAW is merely an egregious example of a broader phenomenon. None of the trade unions can today be considered workers organizations. Over the past four decades, the union bureaucracies have integrated themselves ever more deeply into the companies with which they allegedly negotiate. Union officials’ six-figure salaries and comfortable lifestyles depend on their ability to force concessions onto their members and maintain the companies’ profits.

Workers at MASS MoCA will need to take the initiative away from the UAW to conduct a genuine fight for a living wage. They can do so by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the union. This is the perspective that Will Lehman, a worker at Mack Trucks who is running for president of the UAW, is advancing. His explicit goal is not to reform the union’s corrupt bureaucracy, but to abolish it. The *World Socialist Web Site* endorses his campaign.



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