

Philadelphia Museum of Art workers authorize a strike

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Workers at the Philadelphia Museum of Art have just voted almost unanimously to authorize a strike. Members of a local affiliated with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), they have been bargaining for a contract with the museum administration for the past 22 months. The union filed an unfair labor practice charge against the museum with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) one week ago.

The strike authorization reflects the growing anger not only among workers at the PMA, but among tens if not hundreds of thousands of museum workers across the country, as well as workers at other cultural institutions. Grievances center on working conditions, benefits and wages that have been heavily cut by the soaring inflation rate.

As reported in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the unfair labor practice grievance cites eight instances of unreasonable or improper actions by the museum. According to union president Adam Rizzo, “They’re rehiring for positions that have been traditionally and historically full-time, permanent positions and rehiring them as temporary or term positions.”

Rizzo also pointed to “the museum’s misrepresentation of what is happening at bargaining” and management’s “failure to respond to information requests, so that we can have the information we need to make proposals and the like.”

The Philadelphia strike vote also reflects anger in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the so-called Payroll Protection Program (PPP) has been used to benefit the top cultural institutions while the jobs of thousands of museum workers have not been restored.

As an AFSCME report documented last year, 228 of the largest US institutions received \$771 million in forgivable loans. Meanwhile, museum employment,

which had been slashed by almost one-third (175,000 to 121,000) in the early days of the pandemic, had only partially recovered a year later, with 36,000 jobs still missing.

As reported in the *Art Newspaper*, the top 100 art institutions across the world saw a decline in attendance from 230 million in 2019 to 54 million in 2020. This total rebounded only slightly in 2021, to 71 million. Preliminary reports on attendance for 2022 suggest that the rebound remains partial.

The workers at these institutions have been made to bear the brunt of the pandemic, including the refusal of almost all capitalist governments to institute science-based policies to eliminate and eradicate the virus. Such policies would have made possible a quick reopening of the museums and other institutions under safe conditions. Instead, the top executives at these museums continue to take home million-dollar salaries while the workers who staff the institutions have seen their jobs disappear, or else continue to work as their real wages shrink.

Unions such as AFSCME, the United Auto Workers (UAW) and others have sought to capitalize on the anger and discontent among cultural workers by increasing the number of their dues-paying members. According to a report on the *Truthout* website last fall, organizing campaigns have either succeeded or begun at many high-profile museums, including the Whitney, New Museum and Guggenheim Museum in New York City, the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

As of 2020, workers at 13 percent of US museums were represented by unions. The UAW, AFSCME, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and others are each seeking to enroll some of the remaining

staff at museums, as well as other cultural and educational institutions.

However, while museum workers understandably seek to join forces to fight for their jobs and conditions, a sharp warning is necessary about the role of the unions that currently bargain in their name or seek bargaining rights. These organizations, including AFSCME, with 1.6 million current and retiree members, are fully integrated into the Democratic Party and in that way thoroughly subordinated to the fundamental interests of the ruling class. Their record speaks for itself. The UAW, which has locals bargaining for workers at Columbia and New York Universities as well as at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, has actively collaborated in the closing of plants and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs. Numerous top executives of the UAW, including former presidents and other officers, have been jailed on corruption charges.

The unions betray white collar and blue collar workers alike. In regard to the workers at museums and universities who are members of the UAW, AFSCME or other unions, the executives who run these organizations have agreed to and rammed through wage-cutting sell-out contracts. They have insisted on isolating the different sections of workers, and fear above all a united struggle. They have viciously attacked rank-and-file workers who seek a voice and a genuine fight back.

The strike authorization in Philadelphia, while undoubtedly reflecting the militancy of the membership, does not mean that a strike will take place or even that a date has been set. The union is seeking to use the threat of a walkout to plead with the administration.

It is necessary to distinguish between the militancy of the rank-and-file cultural workers, and the rotten role of the unions that seek their dues only in order to collaborate with the plutocrats that run these institutions. Will Lehman, presently campaigning as the rank-and-file candidate for president of the UAW, explained this in a statement he issued last week in support of a one-day strike by workers at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA), who are members of the UAW.

Lehman called on workers everywhere to support the strike by the Mass MoCA workers, but he also

explained that the biggest obstacle to the mobilization of workers' independent strength is the bloated trade union apparatus, an apparatus that begins at all times from what the system of the super-rich can afford and not from the needs of the working class. Lehman is fighting for the establishment of rank-and-file committees in the auto plants and railroads, in the schools and museums, committees that will start from the needs of the working class and not those of a bankrupt system that has only inflation, austerity, dictatorship and war to offer.

This is above all a political struggle. As Will Lehman declared, “[Joe] Biden and the Democrats speak for the corporate and financial oligarchy just as much as [Donald] Trump and the Republicans.” The organization of the rank-and-file will confront the need to break from the parties of the ruling class and fight for socialism.



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