

Philadelphia Museum of Art workers strike for better pay, conditions

Ray Coleman
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On Monday, workers at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) began an indefinite strike, demanding better pay, job protections and improved benefits such as health care.

Workers at the museum joined the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees District Council 47 in August 2020. Since then, the PMA union, AFSCME Local 397, the bargaining agent for about 190 employees, has been engaged in unsuccessful contract negotiations with the museum.

Workers conducted a one-day walkout on September 16, which the union described as a warning to the museum. Local 397 members had voted 99 percent to authorize a strike on August 30. The strike vote followed the filing of eight Unfair Labor Practice charges by the union against PMA over what AFSCME described as “union-busting activity during contract negotiations.”

On Monday, workers gathered at various points around the museum chanting, “No contract, no peace! No contract, no Matisse!” The latter slogan is a reference to the upcoming exhibition of the works of French painter Henri Matisse called “Matisse in the 1930s,” scheduled to open to the public on October 20.

Crucial installation work ahead of the exhibition, including hanging the art itself, is not yet finished. Local 397 President Adam Rizzo told the local news, “Everyone who installs the paintings—they’re out here today on the lines.”

Workers such as conservators, curators and visitor services workers were all on the picket line, but the museum remained open. On Twitter, the museum announced it would remain open “as we continue to negotiate in good faith toward a fair and appropriate new labor agreement.” Museum Director Sasha Suda, who is paid over \$700,000 a year, welcomed scabs

crossing the picket lines into the museum on Monday with coffee, according to the #ONSTRIKE Philadelphia Museum of Art Union account on Twitter.

Workers also protested at the museum’s loading dock, urging truck drivers and shipping industry employees not to cross their picket lines.

At the heart of the strike are three main issues: pay, health care and paid leave. Despite being in the top 7 percent of US art museums in terms of the size of its endowment, PMA has not increased wages since 2019, amid historic levels of inflation. Additionally, according to data from the Association of Art Museum Directors, full-time jobs at the museum pay 34 percent less, on average, than other art institutions in the Mid-Atlantic region, as well as 33 percent less than art institutions with similarly sized budgets and 20 percent less than the national full-time average pay at such institutions.

Curator Amanda Bock told local news outlet WPVI, “There are definitely jobs that our colleagues have left the museum for that pay definitely better. It’s not only in New York or LA, but that could be at [the] Barnes [Foundation], at PAFA [Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts], the Penn Museum [University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology].”

Moreover, some 89 percent of the members of the PMA union are on health care plans with high deductibles and have to pay 10 percent of most costs before they can access health care, according to a handout from the union in July. According to the local, workers it surveyed said they were more or less forced into choosing the high-deductible plan because its premiums, at \$64.40 per month, were still far less expensive than the premiums for the HMO plan on offer, which started at \$304.77 per month.

Museum workers are also angry at the fact the museum currently offers no paid parental leave. This is not uncommon among museums, with just 44 percent of them nationally offering paid parental leave, according to AAMD data.

Other issues workers have raised concern staffing problems, particularly the museum's reliance on short-term and temporary employees. These positions used to be entry-level roles from which workers could advance their careers, but now advancement opportunities have largely dried up.

In an announcement on the first day of the strike, the museum said it was making an offer to workers that included 8.5 percent wage increases over a 10-month period, followed by a smaller increase so that by July 1, 2024, wages would be 11 percent higher than now. At this rate, workers will not win back the wages lost to inflation since their last raise in 2019, nor keep up with the current pace of price increases.

The museum also offered to raise its minimum salary by 10 percent and give four weeks of paid parental leave, as well as accelerated vacation-time accrual for new hires. This still puts the PMA behind other museums nationally in terms of already inadequate pay. Also, it fails to keep up with other art institutions that offer more than one month of paid leave for new parents.

The strike by the museum workers has garnered sympathy from workers in other industries such as education, with many coming out to the picket line in person or supporting the cause online. The museum workers' strike also comes in the context of a major upsurge of the working class both in the US and internationally.

On Monday, the same day the workers began their strike, the *Guardian* published an article under the headline "New 'Striketober' Looms as US Walkouts Increase Amid Surge in Union Activity." The article cited data from the "labor action tracker" at Cornell University's Institute of Labor Relations (ILR) showing "thousands of workers around the US are going on strike or threatening to do so heading into October." The ILR says strike activity in the US in 2022 has "significantly outpaced" that in 2021.

Rank-and-file cultural workers, whose lives have been disrupted and in some cases shattered by three years of the pandemic, with its openings and closures

and the destruction of tens of thousands of museum jobs worldwide, are in a militant and determined mood. The AFSCME union bureaucracy, however, plays a rotten role in collaborating with the super-wealthy who operate these institutions.

Will Lehman, rank-and-file candidate for president of the UAW, issued a statement in August in support of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) workers out on a one-day strike. Lehman explained that "the biggest obstacle to mobilizing the immense strength of workers is the bloated trade union apparatus which is opposed to the type of battle necessary to substantially improve our living standards." Lehman called for the creation of "rank-and-file committees in every workplace to fight for what workers need and not what the corporate executives, politicians and union bureaucrats say is affordable." Philadelphia museum workers face the same issues.



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