

# Philadelphia Museum of Art workers strike enters second week

Nick Barrickman  
3 October 2022

The strike of nearly 200 Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) workers entered its second week Monday. Curators, conservators and other workers essential to the maintenance and presentation of the vast institution's collection of works are striking over miserably low pay and exorbitant health care costs.

According to Glassdoor.com, a "visitor services assistant" currently receives an average wage of \$18 an hour. This translates into \$35,000 a year in a city that is "the least affordable housing market in the region," according to Public Broadcasting Service affiliate WHYY. The average cost of a home in the city was \$279,900 in July.

On Thursday, officials of American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 47 and the PMA provided testimony to the Philadelphia City Council regarding the conflict at the museum.

AFSCME DC 47 President Catherine Scott declared that the museum would have to show "movement on five core issues" to end the strike. This includes an "across-the-board" retroactive pay raise to all staff, dated to July. This corresponds to the date that non-union museum workers were given raises by the institution.

In addition, the union says it wants \$500 in "longevity" pay for every five years an employee has served the PMA. AFSCME is also asking for a "guaranteed minimum" starting wage of \$16.75 for hourly staff as well as salary increases.

Finally, the museum's current health care plans impose exorbitant costs on workers, forcing them to sign up for only the "high deductible" insurance. In some cases, workers continue paying for bills even after their deductibles have been met.

Adrienne Atilas, a PMA grants manager, also

testified on Thursday. "The pay disparity within the museum is staggering, leaving those of us who actually put art on the walls and lead children's programs to have to strike as a last resort," she explained. Meanwhile, she said, "museum executives bring home salaries ranging from \$200,000 to \$700,000 a year. It's shameful."

For its part, the PMA is offering workers a miserly 11 percent pay increase over years along with a month of paid parental leave.

AFSCME's "guaranteed minimum" wage is utterly inadequate and will leave its members priced out of the Philadelphia housing market. This is consistent with the union's decades-long collaboration with the Democratic Party's attack on public employees and other austerity measures.

The strike of Philadelphia Museum of Art workers comes as the city government faces a deep staffing crisis. According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Nearly 1 in 7 municipal jobs are vacant, and the shortages are complicating the delivery of basic city services."

The newspaper continued, "The most recent data available show that the municipal government here has shed anywhere from several dozen to a few hundred employees every month since mid-2020." The crisis, the *Inquirer* continued, "is emblematic of a much larger problem: Not enough people want to work for the city of Philadelphia."

While members of the Democratic Party-led city council feigned concern and support for the striking workers, the city's government has prioritized big business's interests and developers over the living standards of the working population for decades.

The city's Democratic Party has gutted programs aimed at providing affordable and rent-controlled housing. According to a study published on WHYY

and based on United States Census data, “between 2000 and 2014, Fed researchers find that Philadelphia lost a fifth (23,628) of its housing units that rent for \$750 or less. That’s the rent range that’s ‘affordable’ to the city’s average renter.”

This crisis will only get worse. The city government has noted that at least 14,500 households in the city face potential evictions in the next decade as affordable housing contracts with private landlords come to an end. “Let us not forget that rapidly rising inflation and the looming potential for an economic recession will make the problem much worse, especially for low-income residents,” Kelvin A. Jeremiah, president and CEO of the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA), wrote in the *Inquirer* in September.

The PMA, first established in 1876, is described on its website as “the cultural heart of a great city.” The PMA is home to the Rodin Museum, which possesses the largest collection of works by the renowned late-19th and early-20th century sculptor outside of his home country of France. It also contains famous works by Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns and others.

The strike of nearly 200 museum workers comes amid a rising wave of class struggle internationally. According to the *New York Times*, “in recent years, employees have organized at other major institutions including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.”

In nearby Baltimore, Maryland, employees at the Maryland Institute College of Art have been fighting against layoffs at the school after deciding to unionize. In August, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) workers conducted a one-day strike.

Under these increased conditions of class struggle, AFSCME is seeking to end the Philadelphia museum strike as soon as is politically feasible, as long as the negotiators show “movement.” This is happening even as “contractors and delivery drivers, some belonging to other museum unions, had crossed the picket line,” the *Times* states.

While AFSCME local President Catherine Scott makes declarations to the city council, claiming that PMA workers “are ready for what a strike means,” the union has proven time and time again its willingness to throw its membership, and the artwork, under the bus.

In the 2013–2014 Detroit bankruptcy, AFSCME Council 25 official Ed McNeil lined up behind the city’s initiative to attack municipal workers and to sell off priceless works of art to meet investors’ demands. The bureaucrat’s crass outlook was summed up when he proclaimed “you can’t eat art” to justify the ransacking of the Detroit Institute of Art, which was later privatized.

As *World Socialist Web Site* Arts editor David Walsh wrote at the time: “If McNeil and company have their way, workers certainly won’t be ‘eating art,’ but they won’t be eating anything else either!”



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