Philadelphia Museum of Art workers agree to end their strike and ratify tentative agreement

Bhuvana Tumakur
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On Sunday, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 397 said that 180 of its members had ratified a tentative agreement with the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA). The strike ended on Friday, just a day before a major exhibit was to debut at the world famous private art institute.

After the public announcement of a tentative settlement Friday, Local 397 folded up the strike without the members seeing the details or voting on the contract. By Sunday the contract was ratified, with the PMA local's Twitter account declaring, "Tonight, members … voted 99% in favor of ratifying our hard-won first contract."

The museum agreed to salary increases dated retroactively to July along with raises totaling 14 percent over the next three years. Originally, the museum was offering wage increases of 8.5 percent over the next 10 months and 11 percent by July 1, 2024, which Local 397 negotiators rejected.

Additionally, the minimum hourly wage increased from $15 to $16.75. Workers will receive four weeks of paid parental leave and a lowered cost of health care benefits. In addition, workers won a "longevity" increase of $500 for every five years of employment.

The PMA strike lasted 19 days, threatening to disrupt museum revenues during its fall season. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* cited union leader Adam Rizzo, who said "Visitor volume was 'cut in half' for the duration of the strike." He was referring to "internal emails from management that were accidentally sent to a union representative."

While workers struck on the picket line, PMA's newly hired director Sasha Suda and shareholders hired unqualified scab labor to install the exhibition titled "Matisse in the 1930s." This produced potentially destructive results, with the PMA workers posting social media images of art couriers mishandling paintings during the installation.

The *New York Times* gave expression to the city shareholders' feelings of relief following the conclusion of the strike. "The agreement minimizes disruptions as the museum, which features works by Jasper Johns, Marcel Duchamp, Constantin Brancusi and Auguste Rodin, prepares to open an exhibition on Henri Matisse next week." The publication adds, "Union officials called off a picketing event scheduled for an exhibition-related celebration on Saturday."

Instead, the *Inquirer* notes that Monday was "a normal weekday crowd, with dozens queued up to see the new Matisse show when the museum opened at 10 a.m."

The PMA workers, conservators, curators, and visitor service workers demanded better pay, job protections and improved benefits such as health care.

The strike was widely supported by the public. On October 2, the PMA disabled its Twitter comments feature "due to the volume of inappropriate posts." A recent post on the museum's Instagram generated more than 430 responses, a large number of which were in support of the strike.

Despite the museum workers' struggle receiving widespread support from patrons to fellow workers, AFSCME kept the strike confined to the single picket line at the PMA.

This is despite the struggle of museum workers spreading throughout the east coast and beyond. In recent times, workers at the Whitney Museum of American History in New York City, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art have struck for better

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pay amid increasing inflation.

While the union local touts its “victory” over the museum, inflation is above 8 percent, making the 14 percent raise a 10 percent wage cut over three years. This will be even more destructive to museum workers’ living standards, as Philadelphia recently passed a law requiring its municipal staff to maintain residency inside the city, which will bring higher rent costs. The average cost of a home in Philadelphia was $279,000 in July.

According to Toronto’s *Globe and Mail*, Sasha Suda left behind Ottawa’s National Gallery in order to pursue “professional ambition.” The publication suggests that Suda’s salary range nearly tripled with her new assignment: “When she was hired at the National Gallery, the salary range was listed up to $210,800; Philadelphia’s outgoing director Timothy Rub made US$672,395 in 2019 according to public filings.”

Despite its prestige, the PMA is notorious for the low pay of its workforce. On October 8, an NPR report noted that online documents in 2019 anonymously disclosed museum salaries, outraging workers.“Suddenly museum workers … were able to see vast differences in pay between people who worked in the same jobs, in the same institutions sometimes, but also across institutions,” Laura-Edythe Coleman, assistant professor of Arts Administration and Museum Leadership at Drexel University, told the broadcaster.

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