

120 workers on strike at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art

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One hundred twenty workers struck the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art on Wednesday. MASS MoCA, as the institution is known, located in North Adams in the northwest corner of Massachusetts, is one of the largest centers for contemporary visual art and performing arts in the United States.

Striking workers picketed outside the museum Wednesday, carrying signs that read, “Living Arts, Living Wages,” pointing to the main issue in the strike—the fight for a living wage. Striking workers at the museum—located in a large former factory building complex—include curators, educators, administrative staff, box office staff, custodians, employees in visitor services and others.

MASS MoCA workers voted to unionize in 2021 and are members of United Auto Workers Local 2110. They carried out a one-day strike in 2022, which resulted in a three-year agreement that offered little in needed wages but “allowed” them to reopen the agreement in October 2023 to negotiate further wage increases. After failing to come to an agreement after more than four months, 97 percent of workers voted to take indefinite strike action.

In an open strikebreaking move, the MASS MoCA administration has pledged to keep the museum open. “MASS MoCA cannot agree to terms that will diminish our mission of operational sustainability, upend vital partnerships, reduce our programs, or fundamentally change our creative workplace culture,” said museum director Kristy Edmunds. “Simply put, MASS MoCA has been and will continue to be moved to adopt proposals that are balanced, fair, sustainable and honest.”

The contract agreed to by the UAW in 2022 laid the groundwork for the current dispute. Union

officials—refusing to carry out a fight to win wage increases to lift MASS MoCA workers out of poverty, in a state with one of the highest costs of living in the country—kicked the wages can down the road, allowing museum management to now claim members’ demands for decent wages are excessive and unacceptable.

Meg Labbee, an employee of 25 years, described the conditions facing museum workers, telling local media, “They say the arts and artists come first, but they need to show some regard for the people who work here. We love the work, but we deserve respect and fair conditions.

“Many of us live locally, and our pay has not kept pace with the cost of living,” added Labbee, who lives in the nearby town of Adams. “By raising pay to something more livable, MASS MoCA would not only be supporting its employees but helping lift the community.”

The UAW says that 58 percent of the museum’s unionized employees earn \$16.25 per hour, with full-time workers averaging \$43,600 per year. MASS MoCA management is offering only a \$1 increase, to \$17.25 per hour, bringing annual earnings for workers—including part-timers—to just \$35,880. The union is seeking a minimum 4.5 percent wage increase this year, which would bring the hourly minimum wage to \$18.25.

On February 20, the museum countered with an offer to raise the hourly minimum rate to \$17.25 with a 3.5 percent salary increase. The UAW says that earnings of better-paid management positions at the museum come at the expense of the wages of unionized workers, hardly an astute observation. The union further grovels before MASS MoCA by pointing out that the wage increases it is asking for total only \$150,000 a year, an average of only \$1,250 per worker.

The Economic Policy Institute's Family Budget Calculator estimates the cost of a very modest living in Berkshire County at \$47,000 per year for a single person without children and \$117,000 per year for a family of four. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Living Wage Calculator finds that a childless individual living in Berkshire County would need to make \$21.83 per hour to cover basic needs such as food, housing, medical care and transportation, which is nearly \$7 more than Massachusetts' abysmal \$15 minimum wage.

Based on these numbers, even if the union's current demands were met, most MASS MoCA workers would continue to experience substantial economic hardship. The dismal wages of MASS MoCA workers are just one indication of the hostile attitude of the US political and corporate elite to artists and art and culture generally. "Public funding" for the arts is virtually nonexistent in America, which finds its reflection in the precarious economic conditions faced by artists and museum workers.

The United Auto Workers, once boasting 1.5 million members, now has less than 400,000 after decades of corporatist collaboration with the auto companies, resulting in mass layoffs and plant closures. Seeking to boost its dues base and pad union coffers, the UAW bureaucracy has sought to organize workers at museums, universities, publishers, non-profits and other workplaces with no connection to manufacturing.

In addition to MASS MoCA, UAW Local 2110 has dues-paying members at numerous museums in the US Northeast, including the Bronx Museum of the Arts, Brooklyn Museum, Children's Museum of the Arts, Guggenheim Museum, Jewish Museum, Museum of Modern Art (New York), Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), New Museum of Contemporary Art, Portland Museum of Art and Whitney Museum of American Art.

To break their isolation, MASS MoCA workers should take their strike out of the hands of the UAW bureaucracy and turn to their co-workers in the artistic community. Rank-and-file committees, organized by workers and independent from the union bureaucracy, would take as their starting point what workers need, not what crumbs the museum is willing to offer. If given the call, workers at other cultural institutions in the region would gladly travel to North Adams to join their picket lines and shut down the museum until

workers' demands are won.



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