

UAW pushes through sellout deal at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art

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Late last month, the UAW announced a deal with management at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams. One hundred twenty members of UAW Local 2110 voted to ratify a new contract, ending a strike that began March 6.

The new contract is a sellout. It raises wages to only \$18 an hour, well below a living wage in western Massachusetts. The new wages go into effect within 30 days, retroactive to January 1.

Negotiations began October 1, 2023, and the agreement came after eight collective bargaining sessions focused on wages. The strike lasted for three weeks and workers returned to their jobs the day following the announcement of the deal. During the walkout, MASS MoCA administration kept the museum open in a strikebreaking move.

MASS MoCA is one of the largest centers for contemporary visual art and performing arts in the United States. Its ongoing exhibitions feature works by conceptual and minimalist artist Sol LeWitt; light and space artist and National Medal of Arts recipient James Turrell; and German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer. Performances include dance, theater and musical artists, and public arts programs are offered for children, teens and adults.

MASS MoCA was created in 1999 after numerous fundraising efforts, including those at the state, local and private levels. Along with the Clark Art Institute and the Williams College Museum of Art, MASS MoCA is part of a complex of significant art museums in northern Berkshire County, contributing to the region's cultural life and tourism. The museum's buildings formerly housed printing and electrical component manufacturing facilities.

Prior to the agreement, the UAW stated that 58

percent of the museum's unionized employees earned \$16.25 per hour, with full-time workers averaging \$43,600 per year. MASS MoCA management offered only a \$1 increase, to \$17.25 per hour, bringing annual earnings for workers—including part-timers—to just \$35,880. The union sought a minimum 4.5 percent wage increase this year, which would have brought the hourly minimum wage to \$18.25, just 25 cents per hour more than what was finally ratified.

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' already inadequate \$15 per hour minimum wage. In 2022, a one-day strike resulted in the already meager minimum hourly wage rate moving from \$15.50 to \$16.25.

According to the UAW, the contract agreement includes:

- An increase to \$18/hour minimum
- A 3.5 percent across-the-board increase to base pay, retroactive to January 1, 2024
- A 3.5 percent across-the-board increase to base pay, effective January 1, 2025
- Time-and-a-half overtime rates to apply to all hours worked after 10 hours in a day

Officials for both management and the museum praised the agreement after it was announced. "It's a good agreement," said Maida Rosenstein, director of organizing for UAW Local 2110. The museum's management also offered praise. "The agreement marks

another bold precedent that both the union and MASS MoCA desired and worked together to achieve,” stated Kristy Edmunds, museum director.

Museums should not be treated as luxuries for wealthy individuals but should be publicly funded and open to the public at no charge. MASS MoCA’s current and emeritus board of trustees is made up of financial, political, and educational elites, some of whose personal fortunes would be capable of lifting MASS MoCA workers’ wages out of the poverty level.

The attack on the living standards of museum workers occurs alongside those of autoworkers, logistics workers, railroad workers, healthcare and other workers, both nationally and internationally.

Last year the UAW rammed through a sellout contract on automakers which has paved the way for thousands of layoffs so far this year. The Teamsters union pushed through a similar contract at UPS, which provided management “labor certainty” to close 200 facilities and automate 400 more.

Even more fundamentally, the working class is being made to pay for the trillions spent on wars against Russia, Israel’s genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, and war preparations against China.

MASS MoCA workers must break free of the UAW apparatus and align with the dozens of other dues paying UAW members in the US Northeast by forming rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and the two big-business parties.

In addition to MASS MoCA, UAW Local 2110 holds the contracts at numerous museums in the 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.

Workers at cultural institutions should travel to support their brothers and sisters on picket lines when strikes occur and shut down museums until workers’ demands are met.



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