

Guggenheim museum workers, public defenders in New York City vote to authorize strike action

John Conrad
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Staff at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan, members of United Auto Workers Local 2110, have voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike as contract negotiations drag into their seventh month. The vote, which passed by a 93 percent margin, marks a serious escalation in a struggle that has drawn in workers across New York City's major cultural institutions and coincides with parallel strike preparations by public defenders and legal aid attorneys in the city, also members of the UAW.

Contract negotiations at the Guggenheim have been underway since December 2025 when the previous collective bargaining agreement expired. The talks have been shaped by the museum's abrupt layoff of 20 employees — roughly 7 percent of the total workforce — in February 2025. Drew Reynolds, a museum educator and union chair, told Hyperallergic that the layoffs were implemented 'chaotically,' with affected workers 'made to leave the museum with no advance notice and no union representation.' Those who remained, Reynolds noted, were forced to absorb the workload of their departed colleagues.

The layoffs stand in stark contrast to the museum's treatment of its executive tier. In May, the Guggenheim Foundation announced the appointment of Melissa Chiu, formerly of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, as the next director of the flagship Manhattan Museum. Chiu will take over day-to-day operations of the New York museum while Foundation Director and CEO Mariët Westermann focuses on the foundation's international outposts — including the controversial Abu Dhabi Guggenheim scheduled to open later this year.

Entry-level staff at the Guggenheim earn just \$49,920 annually, and over half of the museum's workforce makes less than \$71,000 — a figure significantly less than the over \$100,000 annual salary necessary for a single adult to live "comfortably" in New York City. Annual health coverage for a single adult begins at \$1,600 and nearly triples for employees with families.

The museum is offering a four-year contract with a 3 percent wage increase retroactive to January and 2.75 percent increases in the three subsequent years — well below New York City's current 5.1 percent inflation rate. The union has proposed a three-year agreement with a 5 percent retroactive increase for 2026 and 4.25 percent for the following two years, along with reduced healthcare costs for employees earning under \$75,000.

The Guggenheim is not the only ongoing contract struggle at cultural institutions. One hundred and eighty-five staff members across visitor services, curatorial, and education departments at the Whitney Museum of American Art, also members of UAW Local 2110, are currently negotiating a new contract after their previous agreement expired on June 30. Workers have held rallies outside the museum's galas to press demands for better wages and protections.

On July 7, members of the Association of Legal Advocates and Attorneys (ALAA), UAW Local 2325, voted by 96 percent to authorize a strike. Approximately 500 attorneys at the Brooklyn Defender Services (BDS), the second-largest public defender organization in New York City, providing legal representation to indigent clients in criminal, immigration, and family court cases in Brooklyn and Queens comprise the local's membership.

The BDS contract expired June 30, alongside agreements at four other public defender organizations — Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem, Bronx Defenders, Center for Family Representation, and Catholic Migration Services — representing over 1,000 attorneys and legal aid staffers. An additional 1,000 attorneys at the Legal Aid Society are also in negotiations.

The attorneys are demanding a higher wage floor, improved health insurance and flexibility to work from home. Those charged with defending the poorest New Yorkers are themselves struggling to survive in the city. A strike would cause significant disruption to criminal courts in two boroughs.

There is a potential for the development of a mass movement of the working class against layoffs, austerity agendas and generally unlivable conditions in the home of Wall Street.

Over the last several years, a movement of museum workers against the deplorable conditions that exist has been building steadily. In January, staff at the Metropolitan Museum of Art voted by a 76 percent margin to unionize with UAW Local 2110, bringing over 540 workers across 50 departments into the UAW after a four-year organizing drive. Local 2110 now holds contracts at more than a dozen cultural institutions in the Northeast, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the New Museum, and MASS MoCA.

At the time, over the last few years, museum workers in New York and other cities have initiated protests against the Gaza genocide.

The struggle by cultural workers takes place amidst a broader upsurge of the working class in New York and nationwide against the soaring cost of living. Driven by the war on Iran and attacks on public services. At the beginning of 2026 nurses carried out the largest and longest strike in New York history. A major contract battle is looming by 40,000 New York transit workers.

However, workers should be forewarned. The UAW bureaucracy's record of betrayal stands in stark contrast to the determination expressed by cultural workers to improve their conditions. At MASS MoCA in 2024, UAW Local 2110 pushed through a contract that raised wages to a pitiful \$18 an hour after a three-week strike — well below the \$21.83 per hour that MIT's Living Wage Calculator estimates is needed for a single adult in Berkshire County, Massachusetts.

In taking up a fight against declining living standards, museum workers directly confront the capitalist oligarchy in the form of the billionaire-dominated boards that govern the major US cultural institutions under conditions where what little public funding for culture exists is under attack by the Trump administration.

Guggenheim workers must see their struggle within the context of a broader offensive by the ruling class against culture and education that has accelerated dramatically under the Trump administration. Trump has defunded the Institute for Museum and Library Services, cutting off a financial lifeline to museums and libraries across the country. He has issued executive orders restructuring the Smithsonian Institution to impose a Nazi-inspired *Gleichschaltung* on American cultural life.

This cultural counterrevolution is financed by the same social layer that sits on museum boards. The Guggenheim's board of trustees includes figures from finance, real estate,

and corporate law whose personal fortunes could lift every museum worker out of poverty many times over. The claim that these institutions 'cannot afford' to pay a living wage is a lie. The billions spent on imperialist war — the war against Iran, the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, the arming of Israel's genocide in Gaza, the military buildup against China — are extracted from the same working class that is told to accept 2.75 percent wage increases while inflation runs at 5.1 percent.

A fight for higher wages, affordable healthcare and the other necessities of life requires an organized fight against the capitalist profit system. The central obstacle facing museum workers, public defenders, and all workers in developing their struggle is the pro-corporate trade union apparatus. The UAW bureaucracy has demonstrated at MASS MoCA and elsewhere that it will not lead a serious fight. Its strategy is to contain militancy within the framework of "good faith" negotiations that inevitably produce contracts leaving workers below a living wage. The union bureaucracy functions as a transmission belt for corporate and state demands, not as an instrument of working-class struggle.

The struggles of museum workers, legal aid attorneys and autoworkers are not separate. They are expressions of a single assault on the working class by a capitalist system in deep crisis. The task is to unite them. Guggenheim workers, Whitney workers, and BDS attorneys should form rank-and-file committees, reach out to workers at other institutions, and link their struggles to the broader fight against war, austerity, and the destruction of democratic rights. The billionaires on the boards of these museums have no intention of conceding anything voluntarily. Only the organized power of the working class, mobilized independently of the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, can break that resistance.



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