

This month's Muse-ing comes from Alan Parkes, a PhD Candidate in UD's Hagley and Museum Studies Programs.

Last month's nineteen-day strike at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) highlights both flaws in the museum field along with paths forward for people who work in and around the GLAM sector on all levels. PMA workers voted to join the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), a union representing employees in non-profits, government and the arts in 2020. The [PMA Union](#) since began a bargaining process with modest demands for increasing hourly wages and salaries, along with improving benefits. After administrators were unwilling to bargain in good faith, union members elected to strike for a contract that met their demands. Ultimately, on October 16th, union members voted to ratify a contract in which PMA management conceded. The contract – [which includes](#) four-week parental leave, 14% raises over three years, increasing minimum hourly wages from \$15 to \$16.75, and reductions in healthcare costs – along with the actions of PMA union members and management, offer telling insight into how the museum profession may move forward.

PMA's striking workers made quick use of [social media](#) to successfully gain public support. Meanwhile the museum's new director, Sasha Suda, seemed reluctant to meet with strikers and hired unqualified scab labor to install the "Matisse in the 1930s" exhibition. PMA workers noted that Suda's choice could have severely damaging results to the art and to PMA's relationship with members and partners who appreciate the expertise of the striking workers. Strikers posted [images](#) of non-union workers mismanaging paintings during installation on social media. They also posted supportive messages from community members, elected officials, and workers from other museums. In contrast, management at PMA deactivated comments on the museum's official Twitter page due to the backlash they received.

The shortcomings of PMA management, the efforts of workers, and the community's support for these strikers require attention from everybody who works in and with museums. There are clear implications for museum management and workers, who generally make [less money](#) than [professionals with comparable educational](#) backgrounds in other fields. Workers can benefit from collective action as demonstrated by PMA workers, and management should recognize their responsibility in meeting workers in good faith. Union organizing and action may be the surest way to guarantee that the profession grows and attracts diverse experts in all areas of museum work. Without it, a reluctance to pay employees livable wages will prohibit people with limited financial support from entering the field. Accordingly, museum studies programs have a responsibility to educate students about labor protections and rights so that they are prepared to respect these protections when in management positions or can act on them as an entry-level employee.

Popular support for PMA strikers signifies [growing support for labor unions](#) throughout the US. Nearby, workers at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archeology [voted to unionize](#), joining PMA workers and a growing number of employees at cultural institutions represented by [AFSCME](#). While Suda's first days in her new position signal ineptness from which museum

management can learn, the actions by union workers present an important lesson for early-career museum professionals. A museum needs its employees to function properly and to serve the public, and workers are part of the publics that museums should serve. Efforts to stymie worker organization in museums that ostensibly uphold community interests diminish the collective values that the communities' museums purport to champion.