



We the Museum

Episode 2:

Unionizing at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (with Adam Rizzo)

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

To paraphrase Adam Rizzo, museums won't do the right thing by their workers just because we ask nicely. In a field rife with labor issues, museum workers are increasingly turning to unions. In this episode, Adam Rizzo of the Philadelphia Museum of Art Union shares their multi-year journey from hushed initial conversations to a three-week strike that was ultimately successful. He walked me through the unionization process and reflected on why unions will make this field stronger.

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): *Welcome back to We the Museum: a podcast for museum workers who want to form a more perfect institution.*

I'm your host, Hannah Hethmon, Owner and Executive Producer at Better Lemon Creative Audio, where I make podcasts for museums, history organizations, and other cultural nonprofits.

If you were following museum news this past fall, you probably heard about workers going on strike at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Lasting 19 days, the PMA strike ended when museum leadership finally agreed to the terms of the new union contract. A win for the workers. But that moment was hard-earned; long before those stories hit the news, workers had been planning, organizing, and negotiating to improve their working lives.

Believe it or not, the first museum union actually formed over 50 years, when in 1971, workers at MoMA organized. Until recently they remained somewhat of an anomaly, despite our industries reputation for low wages and exploitation. But things are changing. Workers at museums around the country have started turning to unions in an effort to improve the labor issue that plague our field, things like low pay, poor health insurance, and inadequate protections for victims of sexual harassment. Unionized museums today include the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Guggenheim, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The Philadelphia Museum of Art was the first "wall to wall" union, including every department. They were soon followed by the Baltimore Museum of Art, who voted to form a wall-to-wall union in summer 2022.

By the way, this movement isn't limited to the US, workers in the UK are also joining unions. I won't be able to cover their struggle in this episode, but I did want to acknowledge their accomplishments.

In November of 2022, so a few months ago, I spoke with Adam Rizzo, museum educator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and President of Local 397, the Philadelphia Museum of Art Union. Adam walked me through their story and the years of struggle and strategy that made their win possible. And he shared some of the lessons PMA organizers learned along the way.

A note on terminology: you'll hear Adam frequently mention the NLRB. For those who don't know, that's the National Labor Relations Board. The NLRB is the independent federal agency here in the US responsible for enforcing U.S. labor law in relation to collective bargaining and unfair labor practices.

And just one more thing: before we get started, I want to shout out our show sponsor, Landslide Creative. This podcast would not be happening without their support. Landslide Creative provides custom website design and development for museums who want to increase their engagement and connect with their visitors, donors and volunteers. With a custom website designed for the unique needs of your museum, you can stop fighting with your website and focus on growing your impact. Head over to LandslideCreative.com to learn more.

So now, without further ado, let's talk unions.

Hannah Hethmon: I think a lot of people have perceptions of unions as something that's for, you know, Amazon facilities or a car factory or, you know, for this kind of industrial work. And there's not a lot of examples out there yet of museums joining unions. So how did you and your colleagues make the mental transition to start thinking about unionization as something that could apply to you?

Adam Rizzo: We have been organizing at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for more than three years now. This was a long process and when we started it like three-plus years ago, I don't think we necessarily knew that we were organizing. It really started as just a bunch of coworkers getting together and having conversations about the things that we were facing in the workplace that were challenging and that were not super pleasant and thinking about ways to address those issues.

So, it was very, very informal at the beginning. Like, we would just, after work meet at people's apartments throughout the city. We would, you know, have some wine, some beer, some snacks, and just kind of talk about the issues that were affecting us most. And what became clear at a certain point was that the issues that were facing say, me, working in the education department we're also affecting folks who are working in other departments, like curatorial, like visitor services, like retail. And it was really surprising to kind of find that common ground between all of those departments because our museum, like many others, is super siloed and also super hierarchical in the way that it's structured. So, I had been working at the museum for five years, and I didn't know my coworkers in other departments.

And coming out of that, we've managed to build a really wonderful community of not only like coworkers, but we've built real friendships and support networks between us. So, in thinking about museum work, I think one of the reasons why maybe we didn't go into it thinking that we were gonna be unionizing at least formally, was that you know there aren't too many museum unions, at least there weren't when we started. You know, there was some stuff going on in New York at the time, like at the New Museum and at the Tenement Museum and we were kind of paying attention to that. But I think there's this idea in non-for-profit cultural work that our work is like so specialized and unique and you need all these special degrees that there's no way that a union could work for that group of workers, which I believe to be absolutely false at this point.

Hannah Hethmon: I think that idea is used to stop so much progress. "We're too unique to implement this diversity or equality thing. We're too unique to address the wage gap. We're too unique to pay you a living wage. Like this is special work."

Adam Rizzo: Yeah, exactly. And I think like that compounded with this idea that I think a lot of folks have internalized in this like workspace is that we don't do this type of work for the money, right? That there's some sort of, whether it be like prestige associated with working

at an institution like the Philadelphia Museum of Art, or whether it's like this idea that we're doing some sort of public service or work that we really, really believe in. Both of those things in conjunction with each other have created these environments where folks are agreeing to work for these huge institutions that have gigantic budgets and can spend hundreds of millions of dollars on expansion projects, but have somehow convinced their workers that they don't necessarily deserve a living wage or to be able to afford healthcare.

And that I think is really harmful for these institutions. And, actually, is 100% *not* sustainable in the long run. Especially when these institutions are doing everything they can—or at least on paper saying they're doing everything they can—to diversify their workplaces and create more equity in those spaces. So, you know, I think in order to do any of that, you need to have people who feel secure in their jobs. You need to have people working at institutions who can afford to start a family, rent a house, buy a house, to live in the cities in which these institutions exist.

Museums are not going to do the right thing just because they're asked to, right? Or because the public expects that from them. Like they're really good at professing certain progressive values. They're less good when it comes to living up to those values. And I think you see that a lot in the way that museums treat their workers.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah. So you're meeting, you're talking about the issues that are affecting everyone in the museum. You're starting to see these commonalities. You're thinking about how they can get better. Talk to me about the story of how you—what's the moment, the period where you transition from really realizing, "Okay, what about a union?" And starting to be like, "All right, we're gonna make a union happen." Like, how does that process begin? How does it turn from meeting in houses to a full-scale effort that is ultimately successful?

Adam Rizzo: There was certainly a moment where I think we started reaching out to other museum unions to kind of just take their temperature and like kind of hear about their experiences. And that might have been the real turning point for us. I think, like we, you know, invited folks from MoMA to come down to Philly to talk to us about their long-standing union. You know, MoMA unionized I think back in the seventies. So they're one of the OGs. So they came down and talked to us. And at that point, like that's when we really got organized. We started pulling organizational charts for the museum, assigning folks to talk to different people, and just like, very awkwardly sometimes—because it's hard to do, it's not something we do in our everyday lives, just like go up to someone you don't know and say like, "Hey, do you want to get a cup of coffee?"

And those conversations were really just like, "Hey, like, how's work? What's going on in your department? What are some things that you'd like to see changed? Are you happy? Are you

sustained with your work? Those conversations were never the same by any means, but I think we were finding that as we kept having more and more conversations, those commonalities just kept coming forward more and more.

Hannah Hethmon: And so what are the kind of big key ideas that keep coming up that like, ah, this could be addressed by unionization?

Adam Rizzo: So obviously the bread and butter stuff: issues like pay, guaranteed increases to your wages. That's something that has never been guaranteed for me in my years at the museum up until now. I received I think like maybe a 1% raise like my first year there, but those were always like very like hush-hush because not everyone would get them. They were definitely not guaranteed. And, you know, there was no like negotiating. I never thought to negotiate, which was part partly my own fault because I'd internalize all these ideas about how we don't do this for the money. We don't talk about money even. Right.

So, you know, having in a contract, guaranteed wage increases over the life of the contract is, is huge. But we were also talking about like healthcare, you know, like a lot of us at the museum are—I'd say 90% of us actually are on the high deductible healthcare plan. That's a plan that is designed for people who make more than \$75,000 a year. That is not most museum workers. So like, you know, the majority of us have these healthcare plans that we can't afford to use.

Hannah Hethmon: It's like negative pay really. A bad healthcare plan is negative pay. A good healthcare plan is positive, neutral might be neutral, but a high-deductible like that—I mean, I have that with my husband's corporate job, the insurance we have; it's negative pay.

Adam Rizzo: Yeah, it is. I talked to a lot of people who shared their stories with me. I had the experience of withholding care, like not going to the doctor for like a year or two to try and let my health savings account build up so that I could afford to go to the doctor. And then, you know, started going to therapy. And within like a year, my health savings account was completely drained and I had to stop going to therapy. So there were stories like that, that you just kept hearing from everyone. Or like the amount of debt that people incurred for starting a family, if they were on the high deductible plan, just the cost that adds up so quickly when you just try and have a baby.

And on top of that, at the museum previously, there was no paid parental leave. So folks were saving up vacation time and sick time so that they could have paid parental leave. Now that's not good for a number of reasons. I think it's like absolutely immoral, but also the fact that people are not taking time for themselves because they're thinking they might wanna start a family or coming into work sick because they wanna save up those days so that they can start a family somewhere down the line.

So, those were some of the issues that were coming up, broadly. I'd say another issue that was maybe specific to the Philadelphia Museum of Art was that there were a number of high-profile cases of harassment at the museum that were reported, but then never dealt with by management. There was a case of really terrible sexual harassment that made it into the newspapers. Another case of a manager who was actually slapping his employees, like awful stuff, and the culture of the institution was allowing that to happen and silencing people. And there was an environment of fear about reporting stuff like that. So, you know, that came up a lot too in conversation. So one of the things that were really important for our members to have in the contract was a strong anti-harassment clause. A clear kind of system in which employees can be disciplined, because there was a fear of retaliation, right? And that happened; people were retaliated against for reporting things.

So, you know, if you have some protections in your contract, there's a very clear disciplinary process, like that doesn't happen anymore, some of that fear goes away, hopefully. So those were the big things that were coming up in those conversations. And you know, the things that we tried our hardest to fight for, to address in the contract.

Hannah Hethmon: You talk about that last issue, I don't think that's unique to your museum. I've heard enough stories even, you know, the ones that make the big newspapers and then the ones that make Twitter or the whisper networks, to know that it's a pervasive issue.

Adam Rizzo: It is. Yeah.

Hannah Hethmon: Okay. So you're thinking, you're gathering this information, you have this idea of like, what are some of the big things we want to do. But you're not like forming your own independent union. You're joining an existing union. So talk to me about that process. Were there multiple unions that would fit and would be helpful and would understand and be able to advocate for you? How does that process work?

Adam Rizzo: We thought it was necessary for us to affiliate with an already established union here in Philadelphia. It kind of felt like dating a little bit [laugh]. We called a bunch of different unions and organizers in Philadelphia and just basically set up times to talk to them.

So like a couple of folks who were doing this informal organizing, we kind of divided and conquered and we had conversations with different union reps. And then at a certain point, once we had done that, we initially had a meeting at my apartment. There were probably about 50 people in my living room, which was, it was packed. This was pre-covid and we

had giant post-its on the walls and people reported out about the conversations they had had with each of the different unions. And then the folks who were there voted for the one that they thought would be the best fit. And the way we chose, we chose AFSCME District Council 47, and the reason we chose them was because they had had some experience working in the cultural sector.

So they had organized, for instance, at the zoo here in Philadelphia, library workers. And then also AFSCME International, which is kind of like the umbrella for District Council 47, they were expressing a strong commitment to organizing workers at cultural institutions and really prioritized it from very early on. So that was a pretty easy decision for us. And since we organized, AFSCME has organized at other institutions like at Art Institute of Chicago, kind of recently, and many, many more after that. So it was an interesting process. But then once we had that partnership, it was really incredible just the knowledge that they were able to provide to us and the assistance and some of the systems that we needed to kind of formalize our organizing. So, we went from sticky notes on the walls to spreadsheets, Oh my gosh. Spreadsheets. So many spreadsheets organizing very employee who we thought was eligible for the union, assigning different people to talk to those people. We had like a rating scale from one to four: one being very union supportive to four being hot stove, don't touch them. So we like got really organized.

Hannah Hethmon: How many, how many employees are at the museum?

Adam Rizzo: Right now, I think it hovers around like 350. In our unit, there are about 190 people right now. So that's the number of people who are represented by the bargaining unit. And at the time we were organizing, we were much higher staffed because it was pre-pandemic. So I think when we were organizing, we were organizing around 250 people. Unfortunately, there were many layoffs in the kind of intervening months, as covid reared its ugly head.

Hannah Hethmon: So you're tracking, you're getting this kind of professional advice, this expertise and knowledge from the union who knows how to get this going. So then as people who follow any news will know it wasn't just smooth sailing from there. There was a lot of pushback. And you ended up having to strike. So talk to me about that process. Once you have to start engaging with leadership, what are the steps that are taken, did they have to approve? What do they have to do? Like, what is the requirement, and then how do they react to that?

Adam Rizzo: Yeah, mean, it's a long process and there are many, many steps along the way. So I'd say like the first thing that we had to do was—and this was before we went public. It's really important at this stage to be as secretive as possible because if management finds out that you are organizing a union drive they can do a lot of nasty things. I work in an at-will state, so if they found out they could just fire someone, right? So, so you have to be

really careful early on. The first step really was to collect cards from folks who were interested in joining the union. And that meant more conversations.

So we were meeting folks you know, for coffee at the museum, having secret little get-togethers in the parking lot, just getting people to sign the card saying that they wanted to join a union. And when you're signing cards, the goal is to have a super-majority of eligible folks who have signed a card showing their interest. You can go public and submit to the NLRB if you have just 51%, right? But you wanna have much greater support than that going in. So we were collecting cards for a couple of weeks and we had collected probably like 60% of folks who we thought were eligible for the union.

And when I say eligible, basically what it comes down to is you can be a part of a union if you're not considered a supervisor. So if you don't have hiring or firing power, if you can't discipline anyone, if you don't approve time cards, basically. So we were trying to figure out who all of those people were along the way. So we were collecting cards and it was March of 2020, and then the world ended all of a sudden.

Hannah: That thing happened.

Adam: That thing happened. Yeah. We kind of had a big pause where we were like, we don't know what we're doing. But as the pandemic kind of continued onwards, we kind of had this moment where we were like, Well, what do we want to do? Do we want to push forward with this or do we not? And you know, we talked to the organizers; all the organizers were feeling very strongly that we should move forward, because I think the pandemic had created even more insecurity and precarity for a lot of us. So we just kind of regrouped, moved everything to Zoom and to like phone calls, and started reaching out to folks to see if they were still interested.

Turned out everyone was feeling very similarly that it was more important than ever to move forward. And so we we kind of regrouped and, and started collecting the last of the cards by just like driving around the city, going to people's houses. You know, it was so early in the pandemic where people were still like not sure if they could even be outside together, so people would like leave their cards tucked in, like under their door mats and we would pick them up and then drop 'em off at the office.

But anyway, so finally we got to the point where we had like a very strong super majority. And that was when we decided on a date to go public. On that day we had a press release lined up. We had our social media campaign ready to launch. We'd worked with a graphic designer on our graphic identity. We had, you know, a communications plan in place ready to go. We submitted the cards officially with help from lawyers from DC 47 to the NLRB. We

submitted a letter to museum management announcing what we were doing. And the rest was kind of history.

[Musical ding for sponsor break]

Hannah Hethmon [Narration]: *We'll be right back to my conversation with Adam Rizzo, but first, it's time for a digital minute with Amanda Dyer, Creative Director at Landslide Creative:*

Amanda Dyer: Hi, I'm Amanda Dyer, creative Director at Landslide Creative, and I've got a quick tip you can use to improve your museum website. Making your website accessible is one of the most important things you can do with your site to better serve all communities. Just like your museum building should be accessible for all visitors, your website should be as well, maximizing your website's.

Accessibility includes practices like ensuring your text is large enough with plenty of contrast, including transcripts and captions for video. Clearly structuring your text, differentiating your links, and writing simple, concise content. Accessible web design is an ethical imperative and a legal requirement in many countries.

Plus, it expands your audience, improves the user experience, and can even boost your search engine performance. You can learn more about accessible design from museums on our website landslidecreative.com/accessible.

Hannah Hethmon [Narration]: *Now back to the episode.*

[Musical ding to end sponsor break]

Hannah Hethmon: So, in an ideal world, you've submitted your cards, let's say everything goes perfectly. Ideally, what happens in like a sentence or two? What's the result then? How does, how does management in the museum respond? Ideally.

Adam Rizzo: Ideally, you know, the museum would say, Wow, you have so much support from workers, we will voluntarily recognize you and begin negotiating the contract in good faith. What happened was not that so the muse you know, from the beginning said like, you know, we respect our employees right, to organize. but we believe that everyone should have their voices heard and, you know, we should have an election, which, you know, is what most employers do. Not all of them, it's what most employers do. However, the PMA from the very beginning, they hired or retained lawyers from Morgan, Lewis & Bockius. and they are a notorious, well, well wait, they don't use the term union busting in their like, official language. I think they say union avoidance.

Hannah Hethmon: That's not very subtle <laugh>. So,

Adam Rizzo:

So, so they hired Morgan, Lewis & Bockius to represent them. We figured out with the museum when we were gonna have our election; it was gonna happen in July of that year. We did a big get out the vote push. This was a mail-in election. We had our election, and we won overwhelmingly, like 89% of folks voted to join the union, which was really incredible.

So then you kind of start the process of negotiating and, you know, we didn't even get to the negotiating table for a couple of months after that because the museum challenged a lot of the positions saying that they weren't eligible to be in the union. So there were unit clarification hearings that we had to go through where we were basically saying, No, this person doesn't supervise anyone. And museum work, oftentimes there are, you know, manager positions that don't manage people but manage projects or you have like these weird like kind of structures where like maybe one person is only supervising like one other person. So, you know, like there's a one-to-one ratio of manager to employee, and maybe they don't even do their time cards; it's like the division head who does it. So there's all those types of things that needed to get sorted out before we could get to the negotiating table, which we eventually did in the fall of 2020, and that's when the long fight really started.

Hannah Hethmon: That is a long fight because it's basically two years it took you to get that negotiation. So the museum resisted and delayed and did what they could to make this a hard process. Ultimately, what turned the tide? How did you manage to bring this period to a close?

Adam Rizzo: Negotiating a first contract is always hard and tends to take longer than like a successor contract because you have to like really build the whole thing from the ground up. We started negotiating on like, simple things like bulletin boards, like what you would've thought would've been very easy kind of issues to get through with management. And you know, from the beginning they fought us on everything. So I should have known that it was gonna be a real fight from the very beginning. The other thing is that we felt really strongly that we should have open bargaining sessions, which meant that any employee in the unit who could flex their time and wanted to attend, could attend the bargaining sessions.

And, you know, that was incredibly helpful for us because as is often the case managers or management is often the best organizer. So having folks see like the arguments they were making and the way they were behaving at the bargaining table, I think really fired people up and got people even more involved.

So we kept trucking along and we were kind of getting there but not fast enough. You know, we were approaching like almost two years at the bargaining table and we needed to

move on from the non-economic issues to the economic issues. And so we decided just to start presenting them to management and, and they fought us so hard. If I thought they fought us hard on non-economic issues, they really, really dug in their heels on the economic issues. And we would do things like show them, you know, comparative data that was put out by like AAMD about, you know, salaries at like-size institutions with similar budgets, etc. And they would just be like, okay we think our salaries are competitive. And we were like, they're not, We're showing you the data. And they're like, no, well, we think they're competitive.

Hannah: Just shows you that “competitive” doesn't mean anything.

Adam Rizzo: Yep. Not a thing. And just saying no to everything.

Hannah: Like no good faith concessions.

Adam: Yeah, it was, it was like really getting painful to try and negotiate on anything with the museum. And they started reducing the amount of time we were meeting with them. So we kept saying, we'll meet with you as much as you want. Like, we'll come to the table whenever, and they would just keep like reducing the time every week where we would be meeting. And so we decided we had to take some action. We did some things along the way, like smaller actions. We had a couple of rallies at the museum that were pretty well attended. And that was great just to see so many union supporters come out and like cheer us on and local politicians and that was really nice.

We did some informational picketing over the course of the two years, like just being outside the museum handing out information to visitors. Of course we were very active on social media sharing what was going on with the public, which, you know, was really important and helpful too. And we continued to have the conversations with our coworkers, the organizing committee, in order to make sure that people were engaged and knew what was going on. So it never slowed down the work. Like the work just actually kept increasing as we were going through this. But those smaller actions, though effective, were clearly not enough.

So we decided to do a strike authorization vote that the membership had to vote on for approval. We had a membership meeting with like more than a hundred members present over Zoom, and I think there was one abstention and everyone else voted for the strike approval. And I thought that would be an escalation in and of itself and the museum might start negotiating, but they didn't.

I think some folks in senior management had this idea that we were just a few disgruntled employees. And was communicating that to the board of trustees. They severely underestimated us. So when they didn't seem to move at all after we did the strike authorization vote, we decided to do a one day warning strike. And that's something that the MFA Boston did before us. So we were kind of following their playbook, and we were really hopeful that that would be it. And we had also filed unfair labor practice charges with the NLRB against the museum.

Hannah Hethmon: Because they weren't actually negotiating. Right?

Adam Rizzo: Yeah.

Hannah Hethmon By law they have to engage in this process, right?

Adam Rizzo: Yes. But there are many tools that they can use slow it down. One of our unfair labor practices was around the issue of like the museum misrepresenting in all-staff emails what was happening at the bargaining table. Because we were getting these weekly all staff emails from senior management that was just anti-union propaganda. Like if people just stopped reading them after a certain point because they were so unpleasant.

Hannah Hethmon: What's their end goal here? Are they just hoping to infinitely prolong or are they hoping you'll just quit? Is that an actual goal that they might have? Is we just like quit?

Adam Rizzo: I think it's a little bit of both. I think it's trying to tire people out and like, you know get folks to kind of lose their energy and enthusiasm which is very real. I had moments where I was like, I don't know if I can do this anymore.

Hannah: It sounds exhausting.

Adam: Yeah. Luckily, we were surrounded by amazing coworkers who when I needed to be lifted up, lifted me up and vice versa. So I think that was one kind of goal to really make us get tired and give up. But I think also there's this other simultaneous goal where they're trying to get to the point of impasse, which means that the union and the management can't get to any agreement on anything further. And if you get to impasse, then sometimes you just have to accept the contract as it is. Or I think in the worst case scenario the union could be decertified. So I think there's a couple of things happening simultaneously.

But what we found after the one day warning strike was that they did come to the table. We met with them the week after the one day morning strike for like nine hours at the Federal

Mediator's office on a Thursday and then another I wanna say five or six hours the next day. And we were able in that time to knock out all of the outstanding non-economic proposals. It was when we got to the economic proposals that we again hit a wall because we had like five outstanding issues in the economic package, all of which were very important to our members. And the museum said to us, "You can choose two of your issues and we'll bring that to the board of trustees to approve."

Hannah Hethmon: You can have two candies, but not all of them. So patronizing. You can choose two. Like, you don't get to decide. Oh man, that is, I was waiting for something bad. You're like, this is upsetting. I'm like, Okay, what is gonna be... there's something about that. It's just so infuriating.

Adam Rizzo: It was absolutely infuriating. And I remember being in that session and we were just like, no, we won't negotiate against ourselves. These are issues that are really important to members. We weren't asking for a lot; our proposals weren't wildly ambitious. They were just trying to address some very specific hardships that people were facing. And so we had to decide what to do and we decided to call for an open-ended strike at that point. And we ended up being out on strike for three weeks. I couldn't believe it. I never thought it would last that long. But we were prepared to hold the line, we had done the work ahead of time to like build the solidarity that we needed. And I think once again, this was a case where museum management just severely underestimated us.

Hannah Hethmon: The negotiations seemed to wrap up pretty quickly after that.

Adam Rizzo: Yeah.

Hannah Hethmon: So, I mean, I guess that's the goal, like you can't end the strike until they negotiate.

Adam Rizzo: Yeah,

Hannah Hethmon: It's a final option.

Adam Rizzo: It really is like your last and, and best point of leverage going out on strike indefinitely. you know, we knew we needed certain things. We timed the strike very strategically to align with the installation of the big Metis show at the museum. It was a happy accident. It also happened to coincide with the first day of our new director, Sasha Suda, who started at the museum on the first day of the strike. so there were like a, a couple of pressure points there that were kind of work working in our favor. Wwe'd also built up over the two years, like an incredible support network of local politicians, of union siblings of just community members. So, you know, we had during the three week strike, you know, members of the museum rescinding their memberships.

We had local politicians calling on the museum management and the board of trustees to come to a reasonable agreement. And what was happening in those three weeks was there was a lot of like behind the scenes machinations happening between like local politicians, the mayor's office, really putting pressure on the museum to do the right thing. and not only the muse but also pressure on the board of trustees. Because ultimately the board of trustees is who makes the final decision. So our board chair, Leslie Ann Miller was getting a lot of phone calls from some very important people telling her that she needed to get her act together. And eventually she did. It took her too long. But eventually she did.

And I think in the end, like we were able to show that the museum couldn't operate without us. You know, they kept saying like, they're putting out these horrible social media posts being like, you know, we are open to the community and we will serve, continue serving the community and blah blah blah, blah. Yeah. It was kind of gross because it just like felt insulting to all of us because we were like, we are the ones who do that community outreach and also aren't we a part of the community? Right. And it's like when that, are we not those people? It's

Hannah Hethmon

The fact that we are open. Like who is the we? Like if the people are gone what, what is just a building with locked doors. Yeah. You know? Yeah. And that very false like community. Like no matter what happens, we'll serve the people we'll do what we're meant to do. Yeah. Yeah. I don't think, I don't think many people bought it <laugh>.

Adam Rizzo: No, I don't, I don't think so either. I think people are smarter than that. and they, you know, I mean they did stay open during the strike. I mean they had managers, they had, you know, division heads and, you know heads of department working coat check. They had like very high senior management positions, slinging tickets and working retail and, you know, and they were being, and you know, I did often feel kind of bad for some of the folks, especially in middle management, because they were being told like, it's up to you if you want to cross the picket line or not, but if you don't, don't come back to the museum.

So like there were like, there was a lot of pressure on, on a lot of folks who, who maybe were union supportive, union friendly, didn't like what senior management was doing, but they were basically being told you will get fired if you don't come in. That's the thing that I can't wrap my head around is like, how do, how do you come back from, how do you feel good about working at a place? Yeah. Like, it's hard enough being out on strike and going back in. But like, we felt like we were really proud of the work we did and everything we achieved in the community we built. But then I think about like those middle managers, like, I mean, that must feel really awful to, to work for an institution that has just treated you like that, which

Hannah Hethmon: Put you like a human shield.

Adam Rizzo: Yeah.

Hannah Hethmon: So I guess I just have like some kind of like rapid fire, like practical questions, like lessons to draw out of this. Coming back, what is the culture like, what is working life like in the museum? Do things feel better? Do you feel like it's gonna take time before the effects are felt? Like what's the kind of aftermath feeling?

Adam Rizzo: I think it's different for everyone. I think it's certainly challenging for everyone, but maybe in different ways. And I think people are experiencing having very different experiences in different departments. so like for instance, I work in education and I think generally speaking, folks in education, even managers tend to be fairly emotionally intelligent people <laugh> and, and are also good at like having conversations and talking about like what, you know, feelings. and you know, so like in my department when we got back, like, and I was grateful for this, our division head, like put in a division meeting on the calendar for us to all like, go into the galleries together in person and just sit and talk about like, the last couple of weeks and you know, like everyone shared very openly and honestly. And, though that wasn't gonna fix anything. Like, it was nice that to, to have folks in management acknowledge that space or acknowledge our experiences and make that space for us. That most certainly did not happen for everyone. you know, like I think like I was talking to some of my colleagues in like installations and packing and like, you know, they got back and, you know, since the museum had hired scabs to hang the Matis show, they got back and found their workspace just like left in disarray.

Hannah Hethmon: Scabs being folks brought in to break the strike.

Adam Rizzo: Yes. Yeah. So you know, they just found their workspace like a mess from like all of the, the folks who don't work at the museum who came in and hung the show hung the show.

So it's hard, and it's going to take some time. And I think right now we're in the process of having to kind of put the contract into practice. and that's challenging for both sides because like we have this legally binding document now and we just need to figure out how to make it work. And, you know, it's, there are gonna be mistakes along the way and we have to kind of create new systems.

But you know, now at least we have, you know, avenues for accountability. We have, you know, I mean the things that we won are just like, I think are really gonna change like a lot of people's lives. Like, maybe not immediately, but I think moving forward, like, you know, we got four weeks of paid parental leave, which is incredible. I would've loved more because obviously starting a family <laugh> a little more time consuming than that. Most people

need more than four weeks. Yeah. But you know, from zero to four is something you know, we, we were able to secure 14% wage increases over the course of the three year contract. Like I said earlier. Like I maybe received 1% raises once in a while, never guaranteed while I was at the museum. You know, museum management, so folks who were not in the unit were given raises of 3% back in July of this year.

But that was not given to union members. So one of the things that we fought for was retroactivity of the raises. So like, you know, our next paycheck will have retroactive raises back to July. we got longevity increases. So, you know, people who have worked at the museum who, who have, you know devoted many, many years of their professional lives to the institution will receive pay increases, for every five years of service at the museum to reward them for their commitment and longevity. We also got our health insurance plan, the high deductible healthcare plan. We got them to lower the, the share that employees pay into that. So like there, there are very tangible things that, that we achieved, which are which I'm really happy about. And I'm already thinking ahead to like when we have to renegotiate the contract in like two and a half years about like all the things that I think we can fight for and win even greater improvements of in, in the future. And

Hannah Hethmon

I think you've also like, so it's not just, it's just not just for you. You've made an impact on the field and you've made an impact and a foundation for everyone who comes to the museum after you to work. I think it's, it to me it seems like this contribution to the greater good of our field far greater contribution than just sucking it up and working for cheap because we care about art, we care about history. you know, because because we love it. This is a much better way to make sure that this is a sustainable place to work and that people are attracted to this field who can keep it alive and make sure that it continues. And we have museums in the future <laugh>.

Adam Rizzo:

Yeah, I agree. And you know, it became very clear to us at a certain point during the strike that like you said, that this was bigger than us. That it wasn't just about the PMA you know, that this was, you know, inspiring folks at other institutions. We had a lot of support and outreach from folks from across the country and that was really, really just wonderful to see. So, you know, the fight, like you said, was not just for us or our institution or the future employees of our institution, it felt much bigger. I think we all know museums aren't perfect places, right? we all know that they're filled with contradictions and problematic histories and a host of other cultural issues that we kind of touched on as we went through this.

But, it's true. Like I really, as much as I have ex had had, as much as I have had like challenging experiences in my time at the PMA, I really do care about the institution and I want it to do better. I wouldn't have put in three-plus years of work for free <laugh>, if I didn't believe that museums can be really special, wonderful places and can, can actually serve the community in a meaningful way. so, you know, I'm hopeful that this will be one

step forward, for the museum and maybe the museum field writ large. Because, you know, I just, it's so painful to see so many brilliant people and passionate people leave the field.

Hannah Hethmon: And leaving feeling burned out, damaged, and heartbroken,

Adam Rizzo: Right? Yeah. And you know, it, it's, it's really hard to see the, the effect that these institutions can have, the negative impact they can have on the work people who work there, but also like, that only harms the institution too. Like, you know, it means that there's no institutional memory. Like, you know, there's, you're constantly training new people. Like the, you can't like, keep people in jobs long enough to like actually like, achieve success. Like, it's not good. It's not healthy for the institution <laugh>. and I think, I think sometimes folks in senior management, just don't see that. And forget that this is, this is this work that we're doing in organizing. What we've been doing has been, we're all doing it in the service of the museum. That's the way we see it. I wish that senior management, I wish the board of trustees would, would, would acknowledge that. But also just recognize that truth, that we are doing this because we love the museum. You know? Even if it doesn't love us back, we love the museum a lot, and that's why we did the work.

Hannah Hethmon

I love that. So I wish we could talk for another hour because I still have so many more questions. But I think I'm not gonna take up any more of your time. I really, really appreciate you spending twice as long talking about this as we originally agreed. I think there's so much more conversation that needs to happen around this. And I hope this sparks some people to start thinking and talking and asking questions and doing research.

Adam Rizzo: Yeah. Well, you have lots of, um material now to work with <laugh>. And I will just say also one of the nice things that I've seen come out of this is that also like, not only have we built this really great community, but also like the connections that we've made with folks at other institutions. I think we have always done our best to try and continue to pay forward the support that we've received. Moving forward, we're like continuing to have conversations and field inquiries from workers at other museums who are just beginning this process. It's really great to see, the movement growing, and I'm hopeful it'll have positive impacts.

[Musical transition]

Hannah Hethmon [Narration]: *Thanks for listening to We the Museum. You've been listening to my conversation with Adam Rizzo, museum educator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and President of Local 397, the Philadelphia Museum of Art Union. My thank to Adam for sharing his time and insights.*

*For show notes and a transcript of this episode, visit the show website:
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*You can find out more about Local 397 by visiting their website,
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the last few years, and a lot more information about what they are doing for their
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