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Workers’ union files lawsuit against the Walters Art Museum for refusing to comply with Maryland Public Information Act

The lawsuit comes after the Walters Art Museum rejected a public information request submitted on behalf of the workers’ union in May.

BALTIMORE – Walters Workers United, organizing with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), filed a lawsuit today against the Walters Art Museum for refusing to provide documents requested through the Maryland Public Information Act (MPIA). The public information request, which was submitted by AFSCME in May, sought records of communications regarding the workers’ unionization efforts, including minutes from the Walters’ Board meetings and contracts between the Museum and any law firms providing advice on union matters.

The Walters Art Museum responded to the request by claiming it is not a public institution and is therefore not subject to the MPIA. Workers, however, disagree and say that there is ample evidence, citing the museum’s own government filings, that proves the Walters Art Museum is a public entity and its refusal to comply is a direct violation of the MPIA.

Although the lawsuit brings to light the question of whether the Walters Art Museum is a public institution, the topic has been of major concern for workers since they first announced their unionization efforts in April 2021. Despite the majority of workers supporting a union at the Museum, Walters’ leadership refused to agree to a union election run by the City of Baltimore based on the claim that they are not a public institution. Other paths to an inclusive election remain open but require an agreement with museum leadership, as the Baltimore Museum of Art has recently done. As a result of the museum’s delay and unwillingness to meet and discuss alternatives with staff, workers have been left fighting for a pathway to union recognition for over a year.

“Over the past 16 months, museum leadership and the Board has steadfastly refused to speak with us on any matter relating to labor relations,” said Greg Bailey, who works in conservation, technical research and collections at the Walters. “A freedom of information act request ensures the transparency and accountability we so sorely need in this matter.”

Garrett Stralnic, who works in security, sees a clear connection between the MPIA lawsuit and Walters Workers United’s vision to hold management more accountable.

“Our decision to file is based in the spirit of transparency and clarity. The Walters’, like all organizations or institutions, is not exempt from a FOIA request,” said Stralnic. “As with the MPIA request, Walters’ management is using their claim of being a private entity to avoid being accountable to workers and blocking us from an inclusive union election.”

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