

Staff at Noguchi Museum in New York City walk out over anti-Palestine censorship

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On August 21, staff at the Noguchi Museum in Queens, New York City, a well-respected museum and sculpture garden, walked off the job to protest a new museum policy that prohibited them from wearing keffiyehs, the Palestinian national headscarf and a widespread symbol of opposition to the Gaza genocide, while at work. According to the Noguchi Museum Rights group, 15 staff members participated.

The new policy was implemented August 14 after a single worker wore a keffiyeh to work. In a violation of First Amendment rights, the museum has decreed that “political speech or the display of ideological symbols is not permitted during working hours or in any areas of the Museum.”

The policy was controversial from the outset and the museum felt obligated to close for the weekend on Friday, August 16.

Over 50 employees signed a petition on August 19 demanding that the restrictions be withdrawn. It explains that at a meeting August 14,

[Noguchi Museum Director Amy] Hau announced that staff would be prohibited from wearing “political dress.” In justification of this ban, Hau referred to guests who felt “unsafe” and “uncomfortable.” She evaded staff questions regarding the content and frequency of guest complaints. Hau cited “safety concerns,” but she was unable to explain the basis of these concerns. Team members across departments unilaterally expressed opposition to the new directive, as well as the manner in which it was created and communicated.

In an update on Thursday, the Instagram page of the Noguchi Museum Rights noted:

Front facing staff scheduled for the day arrived on site with the intent of doing their work as gallery

attendants and shop associates. Morning operations proceeded as normal and front facing staff opened the museum wearing their keffiyehs. Gallery attendants and a shop associate then met with the director and our HR consultant. 3 gallery attendants wearing the keffiyeh were sent home and 4 other front facing employees followed them out in solidarity at 12:23 PM.

In a statement to Hyperallergic, the worker said, “I felt very caught off guard and ambushed ... Obviously, things are politicized, but I am showing my support for Palestinians because I don’t really see this as a political thing. I was raised Christian and I believe in peace.” The group of workers asserts that the “policy was enacted by leadership as an attempt to take a neutral stance, yet banning the keffiyeh is distinctly anti-Palestinian.”

On Sunday, according to an email to the WSW from the Noguchi Museum Rights group, Asians 4 Palestine and Nikkei 4 Palestine, along with other organizations, “decided to show support for the staff and protest the ban by having a keffiyeh-in.” [See photos.]

The workers’ August 19 petition explains that:

Our Astoria community is incredibly diverse, and features a high population of Palestinians. Banning the keffiyeh, a culturally significant garment, sets a strong precedent for the institution. Thus far the Museum has not made any public statement surrounding the ongoing war in Gaza, but by changing the dress code to ban the keffiyeh it is taking a public stance. If this policy were to become public knowledge it would decrease the Museum’s credibility and tarnish its public image. The past two days have already caused harm in the name of “safety”; and the Director has tried to silence voices in the name of “sanctuary.”

The Noguchi Museum is devoted to the works of the sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), whose mother was American and whose father was Japanese. As the biographical note on the museum’s website says, “Noguchi’s work was not well-known in the United States until 1940, when he completed a large-scale sculpture symbolizing the freedom of the press, which was commissioned in 1938 for the Associated Press Building in Rockefeller Center, New York City.” The museum contains many of his sculptures, drawings and models.

Noguchi was profoundly impacted by the internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War by the US government (he was interned for six months in Colorado) and fought in defense of the civil rights of Japanese-Americans.

That a museum devoted to Noguchi’s artwork, and presumably, his democratic ideals, could prohibit the free expression of political views by its staff, much less those opposed to the mass extermination in Gaza, is an indication of the domination of the art world—museums, galleries, publications, collections and dealerships—by the super-rich.

The Noguchi Museum is supported by grants from the city and state of New York, firmly in the hands of the big business Democratic Party. Mayor Eric Adams has been responsible for unleashing the New York Police Department on student and museum protesters, and has called for mask bans so that anti-genocide protesters can easily be identified, comparing the protesters to the KKK. Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul notoriously implied in February that Israel had the right to destroy Gaza: “If Canada someday ever attacked Buffalo, I’m sorry, my friends, there would be no Canada the next day.”

The museum receives funds from Bloomberg Philanthropies, associated with Michael Bloomberg, the former billionaire mayor of New York City and prominent Zionist; the Henry Luce Foundation; the J.M. Kaplan Fund; the SBMC Foundation (associated with the Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation); Con Edison; and the Mitsubishi Corporation.

Particularly revealing is the funding that the museum receives from the Leon Levy Foundation, established by the late Wall Street investor and hedge fund manager. The Levy Foundation is associated with Levy’s wife, Shelby White, a member of the board of directors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and chair of the Friends of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), which has named a center after her and her husband. The IAA, a governmental agency, oversees excavations on the occupied West Bank. The Israeli government claims all artifacts discovered there; that is, the IAA is itself an organization of cultural genocide.

White and Levy were accused of acquiring objects from

the illicit antiquities market, and White has repatriated antiquities from the Levy-White collection at the request of the Manhattan District Attorney’s office.

The walkout by staff at the Noguchi Museum is an important development. Workers are not only defending their right to freedom of speech, but their right to oppose war and genocide publicly in a manner they see fit. The preparation of an escalation of war in the Middle East and against Russia and China by the American and European ruling elite makes the actions by these workers all the more important. Workers’ rights in general and the position of arts workers in particular are at stake. The art world threatens to be suffocated by a ruling elite whose being is hostile to artistic freedom and creativity.

Workers at the Seattle Wing Luke Museum walked out in May to protest an exhibit that equated anti-Zionism and antisemitism. They have been smeared as “antisemites.” Protests at the pro-Zionist policies of art institutions around the world have taken place.

New York City’s cultural institutions have become the target of protests over the last 10 months because of their connections to the Zionist state, either directly or through members of their boards. Protests and occupations have occurred at the Metropolitan Museum and the Brooklyn Museum. The homes of Brooklyn Museum President Anne Pasternak and other board members were graffitied on June 12 by anti-genocide protesters after police brutalized protesters at the museum on May 31. After the graffitiing event, the police searched for and arrested credentialed journalist Samuel Seligson who video-recorded the incident.

Noguchi Museum Rights is asking that supporters send emails to info@noguchi.org or call the museum, (718) 204–7088, with their thoughts.



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