

The Columbus Dispatch

EDUCATION

As union membership hits historic low, Wexner Center for the Arts workers want to unionize



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Published 4:06 p.m. ET March 7, 2022 | Updated 8:55 a.m. ET March 8, 2022

Staff at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University have announced plans to form a union with the hope of making the museum an "equitable, transparent and sustainable workplace."

Wex Workers United sent a letter to Wexner Center and university leaders Friday asking them to recognize their new union, formed in collaboration with AFSCME Ohio Council 8, according to a news release.

"We believe our endeavor is inextricably linked to the center's stated mission and ongoing commitment to social justice and institutional transformation," according to Wex Workers United's letter to leadership. "These goals can only be realized through deep structural change."

University officials referred The Dispatch to the Wexner Center for the Arts for a comment. In a statement Monday evening, Kelly Stevelt and Megan Cavanaugh, the Wexner Center's co-interim executive directors said, "We greatly value our employees and appreciate all they do to support the Wexner Center for the Arts and our mission. We have no further comment at this time."

Unionizing efforts casually started in fall 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic began, said Jo Snyder, the Wex's learning and public practice programs coordinator. That's when the Wex featured the retrospective exhibit "Julia Reichert: 50 Years in Film," about the Ohio-based filmmaker who produced Sundance award-winner "American Factory" and "9to5: The Story of a Movement."

Then in January 2020, the Wex showcased LaToya Ruby Frazier's exhibition "The Last Cruze" about the General Motors plant in Lordstown that stopped production in March 2019.

These pro-labor exhibitions, coupled with employees' diversity, equity, access and inclusivity work with the North Carolina-based Racial Equity Institute, emboldened Wex Workers United to make it official.

"We are grounded in the rich history of labor organizing in Ohio and inspired by the recent wave of unionization that has swept the arts and culture world," the letter states.

Matt Reber, who manages the center's bookstore, said workers raised concerns over pay equity, transparency, top-down decision-making and hearing employees' pandemic-related health and safety concerns.

In the early days of the pandemic, furloughs and the elimination of six positions led to burnout. Then when the Wex reopened before vaccines were widely available, some workers raised concerns about their health and safety, most often when having to ask guests to don face masks.

"Some of the lowest-paid among us were required to put our health on the line and return to public-facing responsibilities on site," the letter read.

At a time when union membership is at a historic low – 10.3% in 2021, according to recent numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics – some white-collar office jobs like museum curatorial, administrative and education staffs are part of a new wave of collective bargaining efforts.

Wex Workers United is one of nearly two dozen arts industry unions that have formed in the last few years. Workers' unions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Guggenheim and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles are on the list.

In addition to museum workers' unions, Snyder said Wex Workers United has also received support from Oscar- and Emmy-winning filmmakers Reichert and Steven Bogner. Both filmmakers have been featured at the Wex multiple times over the years.

"Their right as Americans to join together, to become an official group, is fundamental. Unions are the best protection for working people," Reichart and Bogner wrote in a

statement. "America has many examples of management and unions working together in harmony."

Snyder said "passion-driven workers" – those who work in spaces where they feel a genuine connection to the work they do – often hear a similar narrative.

"We're expected to be grateful that we even have a job in the arts, so we deal with a lot of the things we don't love," she said.

But the pandemic and other instances of workplace inequality have "taken the veneer off" the job to reveal what needs to change, Snyder said.

"It's possible to love your job and still see issues and ways to improve," she said. "Why wouldn't you want to improve something that is a huge part of your life?"

Snyder and Reber said they hope the Wex voluntarily chooses to recognize their union, especially given how many pro-labor exhibits the center has highlighted in the past few years. If not, Snyder said the group is prepared to certify the union by an election vote within the year. The time of that vote though, they said, is ultimately in the university's hands.

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