"We Are Workers in a Workplace Who Have Rights"

Unionization, COVID-19, and the Place of Labor at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum

R. E. Fulton, Erin Reid, Jackie Wait, and *Daniel Walber, Interviewed by Andy Urban*

In April 2019, workers at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum voted seventy-two to three to join United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2110, a union representing employees at arts, cultural, and educational institutions in New York City. Following the union's recognition, a collective bargaining committee representing eighty-nine union-eligible workers was formed and in August 2019 began contract negotiations with representatives of the Tenement Museum's senior management and legal counsel. Negotiations proceeded slowly, with both workers and management easing into the new dynamic, but the overall mood was optimistic.

On Friday, March 13, 2020, the situation changed suddenly. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak in New York City, the Tenement Museum closed its historic buildings to visitors and suspended all in-person programming. The first weekend it was closed, the museum laid off thirteen full-time employees and furloughed seventy part-time and thirty full-time employees without pay. On July 22, the museum announced that an additional seventy-six workers, previously furloughed, would now be laid off as well. During the late spring and summer, bargaining ground to a near halt. Union members interpreted management's decision to put off negotiations and its refusal to establish a rehiring plan for workers who had been let go as delaying tactics that were part of a larger strategy aimed at nullifying the union's recognition. In response, on July 24, 2020, union members and UAW Local 2110 filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), charging the Tenement Museum with exploiting COVID-19 to engage in unfair labor practices and for failing to "bargain in good faith with our union for our right to return to our positions when they are restored."[1] Union members focused on

1 The full text of the complaint that the Tenement Museum Union filed with the NLRB can be found at Tenement Museum Union, Twitter post, July 30, 2020, https://twitter.com/tenemuseunion/

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setting up a mutual aid fund, which raised just shy of $35,000, with most of the disbursed money going to laid-off workers finding it difficult to make rent.[2] The mutual aid fund also served as a rebuke to management's priorities. As workers noted, when management began its own aggressive and well-publicized campaign to "help the Tenement Museum survive," its appeals for donations made no mention of the plight of furloughed and laid off workers struggling to stay afloat.

After the July 2020 layoffs, the union's bargaining unit was reduced to only twelve members. In August, when I conducted my interviews, there was real anxiety that the union was going to be busted. Then, in December 2020, the union announced that a contract had been reached.

The details of that contract, and how it came to be, have not been made public. The Tenement Museum appointed Annie Polland as its new president in December, which may have been one key factor in its success.[3] The four interviewees whom I spoke with over the summer were not involved in the final stages of bargaining since they had been laid off, or, in Jackie Wait's case, had left on her own volition, and therefore no longer felt qualified to discuss museum or union issues. Maida Rosenstein, the president of UAW Local 2110, and Megan Grann from the local, whom I was also referred to, ignored multiple emails I sent to them asking for comment. Even though it is standard practice for labor unions to post collective bargaining agreements online, and UAW Local 2110 has done this with the other workplaces it represents, the Tenement Museum has been omitted.[4] When I finally did hear back from an email account affiliated with the Tenement Museum union, the message I received stated that the union was "scaling back our activity in preparation for another round of negotiations beginning this autumn," and that members of the union were no longer available to talk. Signed as the "Bargaining Committee," the email also contained a prepared statement noting:

> The Tenement Museum Union is pleased to announce that after a 16-month bargaining process we have obtained a short-term contract to ensure recall rights for our members that were laid off last summer, severance pay in the event of permanent layoffs for both full and part-time employees, and basic

status/1288878073107161088. I have also relied on the following interviews and articles about unionization and layoffs at the Tenement Museum for additional context. Meagan Day, "Why New York's Tenement Museum Workers Decided to Unionize: An Interview with Nicole Daniels, Laureen Fredella, and Jackie Wait," *Jacobin*, May 2019; Robin Pogrebin, "A Museum Devoted to Survivors Now Faces Its Own Fight to Live," *New York Times*, April 21, 2020; Hakim Bishara, "Tenement Museum Lays Off 76 Workers, Including Entire Staff of Part-time Educators," *Hyperallergic*, July 22, 2020; and Sarah Cascone, "The Tenement Museum's Union Filed a Complaint With the Labor Board After the Institution Laid Off 80 Percent of Unionized Staff," *Artnet News*, July 31, 2020.

2 "Tenement Museum Union Mutual Aid in Hardship Fund," https://www.gofundme.com/f/tenement-museum-union-mutual-aid-in-hardship-fund.

3 As the interviews address, the former president, Morris Vogel, was viewed by workers as an active opponent of the union. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum, "Tenement Museum Announces New President," December 8, 2020, https://www.tenement.org/in_the_news/tenement-museum-announces-new-president/.

4 "Our Workplaces," https://www.2110uaw.org/workplaces.htm.

> workplace rights and protections. We believe in the mission of the Museum and are excited to have this short-term agreement as a first step to getting our members back to work. We look forward to working with the Museum to support our members as the Museum continues its recovery.

The severance pay included as part of the new contract does not apply retroactively to part-time and full-time workers laid off in March and July, but only to workers "laid off after the certification of the contract."[5] Since the Tenement Museum has very few unionized workers left to lay off, this provision—should it be included in subsequent contracts as well—appears to be primarily about a post-pandemic future.

There is also the question of how many laid off employees will be able to wait out the current situation in a manner that enables them to take advantage of recall rights once the museum is finally able to reopen. Even though other New York City museums have reopened at partial capacity, as of the first week of March 2021 the Tenement Museum remains closed to in-person visitors, except for a limited number of outdoor walking tours and Saturday opening hours for retail sales at the museum shop. The museum's historic tenements, 97 Orchard Street and 103 Orchard Street, are accessible by educator-led tours only, and require visitors to navigate cramped apartments, halls, and stairways where social distancing measures used to restrict the spread of the virus are impossible to maintain. Ironically, the intimacy that defines Tenement Museum tours and makes them a special experience has now become a public health liability. As has been the case with many public history institutions, the Tenement Museum has expanded its offerings of virtual guided tours, school programs, and private events during the pandemic to recoup some of its lost revenue.

The unionization of workforces at museum and historic sites may have been interrupted by the economic fallout and mass layoffs attributed to the virus, but the movement—and the broader question of what types of workplaces public history institutions should aspire to be—is not going to disappear. Employment at nonprofit cultural organizations has always been defined by precarity and high turnover, even before COVID-19. As the interviewees point out in this article, low paying, part-time museum jobs without benefits have always been disproportionately filled by workers with access to generational wealth, who, because of the intersections of race and class in the United States, also tend to be white. Workers at the Tenement Museum see collective bargaining rights as a tool to help mitigate the class and racial privileges that limit workers' entry into, and ability to stay in, jobs at the museum. On Tenement Museum tours, where educators rely on personal connections, experiences, and perspectives to make the past speak to the present, racial diversity among the workforce is not just an issue of equality in hiring. The

5 Tenement Museum Union, emails to author, February 23 and 24, 2021.

question of who works at the Tenement Museum directly shapes how the past gets interpreted, and what (and whose) meanings can be derived from history.

There are also questions as to who should receive credit and compensation when an institution succeeds, and who deserves protections and guarantees when an unanticipated crisis causes it to close. Educators at the Tenement Museum must breathe life into a tour if a visitor or student is to be inspired to ask critical questions about the past and present. Visitor services workers book tours and usher groups in and out of the buildings on a tight schedule, while retail workers sell tickets to walk-in visitors and ring up shop sales in a prompt fashion. Myriad tasks go into making sure visitors can have an all-around positive experience at a museum that competes to be a premier tourist destination in New York City. COVID-19 came at the end of a period in which the Tenement Museum had undergone a massive expansion—crowned by the opening of 103 Orchard Street to tours in December 2017—that put new demands on everyone. Nonetheless, management was dismissive when it came to thinking about how the workers' responsible for handling the increased traffic and new protocols that came with expansion would be affected.

The Tenement Museum's reputation in the field of public history, and its focus on the social history of working-class and immigrant New Yorkers, has allowed it to largely evade critiques about whether it has done enough in areas such as antiracism activism—much in the same way the museum has been able to elide questions of whether it was treating its workforce fairly. One of the more fascinating takeaways from this conversation is how unionization efforts intersected with antiracism work within the museum, and not just because management opposed both initiatives as threats to its authority over the workplace. Because museum workers' calls to hire more Black educators and educators of color were met with additional meetings and new committees rather than with concrete action, the union became a vehicle for mandating formal measures in these areas. After George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police in May 2020, members of the museum's People of Color and White Antiracist caucuses were enlisted to help draft a more robust social justice statement on behalf of the institution, despite being furloughed without pay at the time. As this interview documents, in the minds of museum workers, burnishing the museum's progressive image became yet another service that educators of color and union members seeking to reengage in bargaining with management were called on to provide without compensation.

If the unionization of public history workers is to continue apace—and I wholeheartedly think it should—it would be beneficial to consider who can best organize and represent laborers at historic sites and museums. In our interview, Daniel Walber noted that although they had come to value UAW Local 2110's organizing efforts, museum workers were also aware that they were "the only game in town." The UAW has been in the news recently for the wrong reasons. In December 2020, the union agreed to a settlement with the Department of Justice and a probationary period of federal oversight after high-ranking officials were found guilty of embezzling members' dues and accepting bribes from Chrysler Fiat during contract

negotiations. Department of Justice lawyers also ordered the UAW to allow rank-and-file members to vote on whether, moving forward, they are to elect union leadership directly or continue to use a delegate system long associated with undemocratic elections.[6] With Local 2110, respect for the democratic wishes of rank-and-file members has also been a concern. Most notably, in 2016, UAW Local 2110 conspired with the UAW international to overturn the vote of its graduate student unit at New York University after bargaining unit members endorsed the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The local also disqualified from union offices candidates who had been active in supporting BDS.[7] Regardless of one's opinion about BDS and Israeli politics, from the standpoint of supporting labor democracy, such moves should raise serious red flags about how UAW Local 2110 works. For instance, what happens if union members at the Tenement Museum seek to use their collective voice to advocate for critical positions concerning racial and social justice that run afoul of the UAW's executive ideology? I am active in my own faculty union, the Rutgers chapter of the AAUP-AFT, and the unapologetically leftist union organizers I spoke with expressed skepticism about the UAW's business model of organizing, which they felt privileged compromises with management over direct action. But, as Sherry Wolf, a senior organizer at Rutgers, put it, "what happens on the ground matters." Workers at the Tenement Museum will have a chance to shape Local 2110's direction, so long as they are willing to potentially take on an internal fight as well.[8]

How workers' collective struggles get narrated and remembered as part of public memory is a question that has long appealed to oral and public historians.[9] Looking at our own proverbial shopfloors, public historians now have an obligation to document and study unionization efforts at museums and historic sites—as well as opposition to these efforts—and to try and make sense of why democratic workplaces matter to our chosen field. Too often, public historians fail to examine the fact that museums and historic sites are also workplaces where management and labor struggle over how the service being offered, critical engagement with the past, gets produced and consumed.[10] At the Tenement Museum and at plenty of

6 Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opening the Door to a More Democratic UAW," *Labor Notes*, January 19, 2021, https://labornotes.org/2021/01/opening-door-more-democratic-uaw.

7 On the UAW's decision to overturn graduate students' vote to support BDS, see the materials posted to the anti-BDS website, "GSOC for Open Dialogue on Israel and Palestine," https://www.opendialoguenyu.com/uaw-appeal-result.html; Conor Skelding, "NYU Grad Union Says Parent Union Disqualified Candidates Who Back Israel Boycott," *Politico*, April 20, 2016.

8 Sherry Wolf, conversation with author, February 23, 2021.

9 See, for example, Allesandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); and Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also the documentary *Bisbee '17*, directed by Robert Greene (Doc Society, 2018).

10 There are numerous scholarly works that detail conflicts over interpretation at museums and historic sites, but they tend not to view these conflicts as rooted in clashes between labor and management. Nor do they grapple with what it means for public history institutions to exist and operate within a capitalist economy. A notable exception to this is Amy Tyson, *The Wages of History:*

other public history institutions, it should not be shocking that labor and management have differing interests not only in respect to what should constitute fair job conditions, pay, and benefits—but also when it comes to interpretation, narrative focus, and what the museum's mission and ethos as a community member, employer, advocate, and ally should be.

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The text from these conversations have been condensed and edited for clarity. The interview with Fulton, Wait, and Walber took place on August 5, 2020, on Zoom.

R. E. Fulton: My name is R. E. Fulton and until recently, I was a part-time educator at the Tenement Museum. I was hired in August of 2017.

Daniel Walber: I'm Daniel Walber. I was hired in April of 2018 and was a part-time educator for two years before getting the same email as R. E.

Jacqueline Wait: My name's Jackie Wait and I've been at the museum for three and a half years. I am the advance sales billing associate (advance sales are also known as group services).

Urban: Prior to starting work at the Tenement Museum, what were your views of the museum and its mission? What were your expectations of the Tenement Museum as a workplace?

Walber: I think of the three of us, I went into the job with the most context because I had visited the museum a number of times. I grew up in Philly. I went to a Quaker high school, and I went on synagogue trips to the Tenement Museum. By the time I applied for the job, I was also finishing my first year of grad school in cultural heritage management at Johns Hopkins. So I had read a lot about the Tenement Museum because the Museum Studies world is thrilled in many ways, for good reasons, by the progressive, forward-thinking work being done by the education department at the museum, and how it represents where public history is going.

Fulton: I knew very little about the Tenement Museum when I applied. I had just moved to New York and I was looking for jobs. I had a history degree, so I was plugging the word history into a lot of search engines. But in general, just from cultural osmosis, I had a sense that unlike other history museums, the Tenement Museum was kind of cool.

Wait: Like R. E., I definitely didn't have as much context as Daniel. I've worked now three different jobs at the museum. When I first came in, it was with the

Emotional Labor on Public History's Front Lines (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013). On the Tenement Museum's relationship to capitalism, see also Urban, "History Museums and Capitalism: The Need for Critical Conversations," *Gotham: A Blog for Scholars of New York City History*, April 16, 2019, https://www.gothamcenter.org/blog/history-museums-and-capitalism-the-need-for-critical-conversations; and Minju Bae, "Unraveling 'Under One Roof': The Tenement Museum and Its Discontents," *LABOR: Studies in Working Class History* 17 (2020): 75–90.

retail department. I knew that the museum did trivia with the Bowery Boys podcast folks, and I loved that podcast and so I ended up at the museum.

Urban: What is a typical day of work like at the museum? What are some of the unique challenges that accompany working at the Tenement Museum, which might not be readily apparent to the public taking tours?

Fulton: My immediate response is that it's two Irish Outsiders tours and then a Shop Life tour. The core of a typical day is having three to four tours, and switching back and forth between being in 97 Orchard, interacting with visitors, and creating a facilitated dialogue around history, historic objects, and the building, and then transitioning back into everything else. I think some of the most important parts are the outside reading and research and just talking and workshopping informally with colleagues, which happens in-between tours. I think I've learned far more in these conversations than in a lot of other contexts. Tours that were started in the 90s have an enormous bulk of content and documentation, while others that are newer don't have quite as much.

I think that with creating a facilitated dialogue around history, with a different group every time, there's no possible way to actually capture all of the information and anticipate all of the different histories that you might need. For instance, sometimes the content that I've been given in training mentions a law but doesn't give as much detail as I feel like I need to explain it. Sometimes it's a visitor asking a question that I've never heard before and realizing, oh, that's something that I want to be able to answer the next time.

Wait: I think the complicated logistics that go on before and after each program are really what come to mind. I'm in a small department and the whole day is pretty much based around when the school groups come in, which is what is expected by management. So, going and seeing them in person, and then coming back to my desk and answering the general call center phone. Even though my title is billing associate, maybe 50 percent of my work has to do with billing. The whole day consists of problem solving. I come in in the morning and find out who has called out and who is sick. Education managers try really hard to find who can fill in a tour here and there, but it's my responsibility and the responsibility of my department to break the news to a teacher, "Hey, so something that you planned on is not going to happen today because we don't necessarily have the staff to make that happen, even though you paid to make that happen."

Our programs have grown, but not our compensation.

With each job change that I have had, I have not been able to let go the responsibilities of the one I have left.

Walber: I was one of a number of people that were trained as a coordinator, as a part-time educator, which means that it was regularly my responsibility to arrive earlier in the morning to open up 97 Orchard Street or to stay late to close.

This is not physically demanding work but is work that is more responsibility and that doesn't come with any raise.

There was a really dramatic moment early on in our organizing process in which educators had been asking for a more transparent conversation on healthcare as a possibility for part-time educators. And the response was to show us a PDF of our job description, which is of course funny because the museum regularly asks us to do things beyond that job description. But then it's "Well, actually all of those things are things that you must be doing out of the goodness of your heart and we're not really asking you to do them."

Wait: I'm not an educator, but it surprises me that the museum does not focus on retention because visitors will not be satisfied unless I can either find the person who can answer questions for them or answer them myself.

Urban: Is that because the Tenement Museum, at the level of management, thinks that there is a limitless supply of potential workers who can fill in if somebody leaves?

Wait: I think there is an expectation that anybody can [lead the tour] because the content is printed so of course a new person can learn that, but also, from management's standpoint, we can't pay you enough and a lot of people who work at the museum are young so they are replaceable. We're not going to increase that salary.

Walber: There is not an awareness in higher levels of management that there is a fundamental difference in a person who leaves who's been there for, even a year and a half and knows a half-dozen tours, and a person who is arriving and has to learn them one at a time. Any grad student can tell you about the American Revolution, but no grad student can tell you about Fanny Rogarshevsky, right? [Fanny was a resident of 97 Orchard Street who is featured on tours.] The thing that makes the tours worthy of academic scrutiny and worthy of these wonderful articles about how amazing the Tenement Museum is, is the work done by educators between tours and on tours, but beyond the content. I don't know that currently upper management is aware that there's all of this additional expertise that you learn by working at the museum, which is why those tours are worth going on. And if everyone were to be replaced by new people tomorrow, the quality of the experience would plummet significantly. It's that institutional knowledge that makes the Tenement Museum worth visiting.

Fulton: I think that phrase that you just used, Daniel, institutional knowledge, is key. As much as the extra reading that I've done has enriched my tours, it's the books that other people have read that have made my tours better. It's the books that somebody else has read, and they have given me the one sentence version. I'm able to incorporate such broad scholarship into my historical work that I would never have been able to do as an individual. That's part of the equation

here. Upper management imagines that you read history, you learn history, you deliver history. And they're missing out, not just on the extra labor that individuals are doing, but the collaboration and the cumulative years of experience and reading that go into every tour through that community.

Urban: Are all employees including members of upper management still required to give tours? Did they get rid of that altogether?

Wait: The requirement used to be that every single person, manager or not, had to do a tour after one year of working there. That went away about four or five years ago but now, since all of the educators are gone, and this is part of why we have taken out our grievance [with the NLRB], every single staff member is very strongly encouraged to learn a tour. I think there are only three of us, including myself, who said, "No, this is a union person's work, so I am not doing this." The alternative is, "We'll train you more on visitor services," which is also due to part-timers let go.

Urban: Could you walk me through the events that led staff members to organize and form a union? Did the museum's focus on working people, immigrant lives, and the history of labor unions on the Lower East Side have any impact on the process?

Walber: I don't think that the fact that the museum focuses so much on labor history is the reason that we have a union now. I think previous efforts to unionize maybe took too much for granted that people would think, "Oh, well we talk about labor history so creating a union is going to be a walk in the park." R. E. and I were both on the early organizing committee, and the move to unionize came out of a conversation about the corporatization of the Tenement Museum, and the direct impact that that corporatization was having on our day-to-day lives, on our paychecks, and on our schedules.

This was at a moment when most of the upper management was relatively new. Kevin Jennings was president [Jennings left in December 2019] and there was a lot of talk from him about the need for growth and the need for significant economic growth in particular. [If] you're sitting in a meeting and the president of the museum is talking to you about growth and the Boston Consulting Group and whatever, it goes over your head. But then a month later they say that the strategic plan requires being open later on Saturdays and everyone who works on Saturday is going to be asked to work later and we're not going to tell you this ahead of time and you're not going to have the opportunity to opt in or opt out, at least not at first, and that management will not be providing answers about things like safety concerns.

We began asking questions. Does the strategic plan include anything related to the livelihood of frontline staff? Their response was a PDF of our job description. We continued asking each other these questions and met a number of times in late fall and then the winter of 2018 and 2019, and that's how it started.

Fulton: The hours on Saturday truly was the triggering event. On a very objective level, it's a small thing. It's literally an hour of time. But that change was instituted without consulting any of the people whose lives would be affected and came on the heels of all kinds of other things that were issues you see in every single workplace. I don't remember a time in the three years when I was working at the Tenement Museum where there wasn't some sense of, "well, there are problems in this job," or, "I wish we could do something about some of the difficulties that we're having at work."

I'd already been teaching at that point at the Tenement Museum for one and a half, two years. I'd been teaching labor history, but I'd never been in a union. I'd never formed a union. I didn't know that much about how they worked in a twenty-first century context. The most interesting realization was, "oh, the problems that I'm having in my workplace, where I'm being asked to do things beyond my job description, where I'm being asked to sometimes work in situations where I maybe feel a little bit unsafe, such as being in a very hot building in the summer, that's not just the Tenement Museum." That's a workplace under capitalism and unionization is something that is not just something that we can do at the Tenement Museum, it's something that we're doing because we are workers in a workplace who have rights.

And so, I think realizing that and being able to communicate that was, in some ways, the most important part of what we were doing in our union. We were pushing back against the idea that the problem with the Tenement Museum's treatment of its workers was, "Well, these are workers who are teaching labor history and therefore you should give them rights." In fact, the problem was, they're workers, treat them well, right?

Urban: Did management ever try to exploit the idea that, "Well, you're working for an institution that contributes to the social good. You should tolerate disagreeable working conditions and extra unpaid hours because you should be happy you have a job that's contributing."

Fulton: What they did use was an amorphous, "we're a family" narrative, which is, again, not specific to the Tenement Museum. In the previous two attempts to unionize management had also used the narrative, "we're a family, we'll take care of you." "You don't need a union because we're already committed to taking care of you."

I think why it didn't work this time around was that one, we really committed from the very beginning to including every single person who would be in the potential [bargaining] unit, and made sure that everyone was part of the conversation and had access to the meetings, and that everyone was able to be involved. And so [organizers] committed in a very, very material and practical way to "family."

Middle management are people we have much closer relationships with and I can only speak to education, but in education there was not a lot said about the

union in part because the personal relationships that make our jobs successful are so strong and so positive. The theme with the union was, in respect to educators' interactions with their managers, "We don't know exactly how this will potentially change things. We don't want to make anybody uncomfortable so we're not going to say very much about it. You're not going to say very much about it."

Wait: I think a big part of advance sales and visitor services being on board is the fact that the New Museum had just also unionized. So, in the press, we had heard [how management at the New Museum] was also claiming to its workers, "It is your pleasure to work here."

Senior management held meetings to talk to different staff and divided us up to say [unionization] was a bad idea that really did not work in our favor but that didn't feel right and led to recognition that, "You're talking about this family, but the people who are really in the boat are the other people who are telling us we should unionize."

Urban: When the vote to ratify the union was held in April 2019, what led to such an overwhelming vote in favor of the union?

Fulton: Sheer organizing, staying in touch with people, constant texting. Everybody was getting so many texts on the days leading up to that vote. We split it up, everybody had people to text. So, I think part of it is just that absolute commitment from the very beginning to keeping people in the loop.

Urban: I'm imagining a museum worker reading this interview and getting some ideas themselves. Coworkers don't just start texting each other automatically. You have to build that spirit and solidarity.

Fulton: We had an advantage because we had a very strong break room culture and so there was already this sense, which I haven't had in a lot of other workplaces that I've been in, that we all talked to each other.

There's nobody who works in my department at the Tenement Museum who I haven't had a conversation with and that's very much not the case in other workplaces. The first step in unionizing is to figure out who's working with you: who else has my job? How do they feel about their job? Part of what led us to be successful was that we already had such a strong inbuilt community of people who know each other, care about each other, and talk about their work together all the time.

Walber: There were spark issues like healthcare and the Saturday hours, but we didn't start with, "these are the reasons we feel like unionizing." We started by having a meeting in which we got together and collectively brainstormed things that we liked about the institution, things that we didn't like about the institution, and things we would like to prioritize changing. Didn't even say that a union was necessarily the answer at that first meeting. It came pretty quickly

and pretty organically, but it was about just being in open communication as much as possible. I also think that's why, in terms of the margin, management's attempt at a union busting effort, before we got our election, fell flat on its face. They held these captive audience meetings and most of the people who went into them, because of the conversations we had been having and the information that we had been sharing, knew what misinformation was. They had the opportunity to raise their hands in those meetings and say, "that's misinformation, sorry."

Urban: What has been the role of the museum's Board of Trustees during unionization and collective bargaining?

Walber: The board is a fairly distant group of people at the Tenement Museum, with the exception of the recently added academics who support the academic work of the museum and come talk to educators. They're great. Everyone else, we know nothing about, except the guy who was the reason that we have Howard Robbins [from the law firm of Proskauer Rose] as the lawyer [representing management in collective bargaining].[11] The primary function of a board is to fundraise and to support a museum financially. More than 70 percent of the budget of the Tenement Museum before COVID came out of earned revenue generated by unionized employees in the shop, through ticket sales and the booking of school groups. The rest of that 30 percent comes from a handful of different things. It is not as if the board is supplying all of the remaining revenue not generated by unionized employees. There are individuals on the board who some basic Googling shows have enough wealth that they could save the Tenement Museum without thinking about it very much. It begs the question, what does the board do if their primary responsibility is raising money, and they're not doing that?

Fulton: Co-signed.

Urban: The union was in the middle of collective bargaining and negotiating a contract when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Before the coronavirus outbreak, how was collective bargaining going? What were some of the sticking points in the negotiations?

Fulton: Jackie and I are both on the bargaining committee and I would say that we went in very optimistic. The museum had agreed to neutrality after those captive

11 Robbins specializes in representing management in collective bargaining negotiations and unfair labor practice lawsuits. His biography on Proskauer's website includes reference to a *New Yorker* article stating that "Robbins's name is synonymous with tough management," https://www.proskauer.com/professionals/howard-robbins. When asked by the *New York Times* about unionization efforts at the Tenement Museum, Museum of Modern Art, and New Museum, and executives' responses, Robbins stated that "These are liberal, progressive people. It's bizarre they are being demonized as if they're Henry Clay Frick." Elizabeth A. Harris and Robin Pogrebin, "Inside Hushed Museum Hallways, a Rumble Over Pay Grows Louder," *New York Times*, July 22, 2019.

audience meetings. Economic stability was part of the picture [in negotiations], but I think the bulk of our proposals were noneconomic, having to do with things like the work week, with break time, and with ensuring safety procedures in the workplace. We also had proposals on ways to create a labor-management committee, to support dialogue between workers and management, to prevent things like adding an hour to everyone's schedules on Saturdays.

We started [negotiating] in August of 2019 and then the pandemic hit in March [2020].

The museum's bargaining committee, the people on the management team, had never bargained a union contract before. Neither had we. There was this sense that we both were not quite sure what we were doing, but that we really wanted to improve this institution. We want to make this a better workplace, but there were sometimes disagreements on what that would look like. The biggest [disagreement] was that the focus for management was always on the economics, understandably enough. It became sometimes difficult to bring the focus back to non-economic issues that were the most important to us.

We proposed that in the visitor's center, where there's the front desk where visitors come to buy tickets, to have stools there. Because the visitor services' and retail workers are on their feet for eight and half hours a day, that's exhausting. So, we proposed, "let's put three stools behind the desk." And [management] came back to us saying that it would cost, I don't remember the exact figure, but it was tens of thousands of dollars.

That for me was one of those moments where I felt: "Okay, we're using different arithmetic here." For them it was a question of, "Oh, putting in these stools is going to mean changing the way we do business. And that will result in this drastic reduction of revenue." Whereas for us, we're saying, "People are standing on their feet eight hours a day, let them sit for part of that." The disconnect was "you're really afraid of losing money. Here's the thing that we're really afraid of. Being physically impacted in a negative way by work."

Urban: Did members of management's bargaining committee give the impression that margins were so narrow that each of these decisions about stools could potentially lead to financial ruin?

Fulton: As an educator, I had gotten presentations on the budget before we started unionizing. The point of collective bargaining is to work with whatever the budget is and to figure out what is the most mutually beneficial arrangement that will allow workers to have protection, to have rights, and to have the compensation that they deserve within the budget that exists at the museum. It felt to me [management] was deflecting from the actual issues that we'd raise and not trying to find a creative solution where they would ask: "how could we get stools in the visitor center without costing ourselves tens of thousands of dollars?"

Wait: Management used a rhetoric of "We have this finite pot of money. And if we make any small change . . . " indicating that the museum was in a dire financial position. Cutting or not increasing the benefits of workers before cutting any kind of program was one hundred percent the rhetoric.

Fulton: While we're talking about the money, I think it's important to repeat here that the vast majority of the museum's revenue comes from ticket sales and shop sales. It's the work that union members are doing that is bringing in the overwhelming majority of the operating budget. That's an important part of this conversation.

Urban: An important topic for a lot of part-time museum workers and educators across the country is healthcare. What was the union negotiating for in respect to healthcare benefits moving forward?

Fulton: We proposed having healthcare for everyone in the union, part-timers included. But in budget conversations, we also considered what if there isn't actually the funding for that? How can we honor the needs of people who have been here for years? For whom is working at the Tenement Museum primary employment, and who needs to get healthcare through this job? In bargaining, we proposed that people could opt out if they have a spouse who is giving them health insurance through another job. This was the kind of creative thinking that we were trying to bring to the problem of providing healthcare to all workers.

Wait: Senior management's rhetoric throughout was, "This is a job. You must treat it as so," yet there was no recognition of the fact that so many of these part-time educators need to have another source of income, and figure out what they were going to do about healthcare. There is no other option unless you have a lot of generational wealth that you can't have another source of income, yet what are we going to do about healthcare?

Walber: And that's definitely resonant with people who work at museums all over the country.

Fulton: We had gotten to a place of agreement or were very close to an agreement on several proposals. There was a sense, I think on both sides of the table, by March, that things were moving a little slower than we would have liked, but that there was movement happening.

Urban: What were your initial reactions to the museum having to close on March 13, due to COVID-19?

Wait: About a week before we closed, we had a large number of groups that were canceling, and we refunded everybody. There was no keeping of deposits. We refunded everybody. People's flights were getting canceled, schools were really unsure about coming. It was scary because at that point, restaurants hadn't closed yet.

[After March 13] I thought we would be closed for a couple of weeks. But then [the museum's president] Morris Vogel said he would be sending an email to all employees every Friday. An email once a week made it feel like this is going to be a long haul.

Urban: Did the union have any say in questions about when the museum would close?

Fulton: We found out that the museum was closing because they posted it on their website. They did not inform us beforehand, let alone ask us.
On March 13, there were thirteen people who were terminated, who were laid off permanently. And then the remainder of staff was furloughed.

Walber: That was a moment of confusion more than anything else. My experience was entirely confusion because I was out of town at the time. Despite being out of town, we were on the phone very, very quickly to start talking about a mutual aid fund for people that were going to be furloughed because it was pretty clear that furloughed people were not going to be paid. We were really worried. This was before the $600 [weekly unemployment stipend passed by Congress] happened. We had no idea what the need was going to be.
The other thing about that initial wave of firings that Friday [March 13] is that it did not feel as if COVID was the primary reason. It felt like an excuse. They fired the full-time person who was responsible for distance learning at the beginning of the pandemic. There's a more elaborate story that . . . who knows? But it wasn't like these are thirteen people that we're not going to need during a pandemic and that we can't come up with work for during a pandemic.

Fulton: And the narrative we were given was very much, "We have to lay people off to survive." There was no sense of how laying off those people would in any way allow the museum to survive other than just raw money. And even if it was raw money, why would you lay off the distance learning, right? So, it was very much confusion. That was the mood.

Urban: Let's assume a situation where the union was in a position to have more say in how the COVID-19 crisis was to be handled. Once it was clear that the museum wasn't going to be able to be open to the public and that there was going to be lost revenue, as workers, what are some of the things that you might've done differently?

Fulton: Creating digital programming is a huge part of the answer. They fired the person whose job that was. They've definitely done some digital programming since, some virtual school groups, but there was an opportunity to take the enormous, rich breadth of knowledge, creativity, and experience among the unionized workers, and translate that into online programming. Apart from firing everyone and refusing to bargain, I would say my biggest frustration and disappointment has been a lack of creativity [on management's part]. A

lack of willingness to problem-solve and find new solutions and ways of doing things.

It's also frustrating because one of our core values in the Education Department, as we are told repeatedly in training, is flexibility and being able to adapt, and being able to respond quickly to situations. That's part of what we are all trained to do on the ground, and the fact that the people in management making decisions about our jobs, and how and whether they happen, are not able or willing to do that same thing, that's frustrating.

Urban: During its closure, the Tenement Museum has been quite aggressive in soliciting donations. On Twitter and on Facebook, I've seen numerous posts from friends and colleagues with variations on the theme: "Save the Tenement Museum." What are your thoughts on how the museum's actions during the pandemic have played out in the public sphere?

Walber: I think the public loves the Tenement Museum because the public came on tours, and the tours are great because the unionized workforce is fantastic. The work that everyone puts in, from when you book the school group to when the kids arrive to the experience afterwards, every person that you interact with, almost all of whom are unionized employees, are living the vision of the Tenement Museum as a place where complicated conversations can happen.

Urban: A final question—on a more personal level, how are all of you doing?

Fulton: It's 2020. There's no short answer to that question. Part of the answer is I'm doing fine because I was one of the people who did not rely on my job at the Tenement Museum for financial stability. I was one of the many people who was able to keep my Tenement Museum job as long as I did, because I had other means of getting support.

I think the fact that I had my job as long as I did is a sign of exactly what was wrong all along. So many of the people who are able to stay at the Tenement Museum for a long time are able to do so because of generational wealth. Or they're able to do so because they have six other jobs. They're able to do so because they have a spouse who's a doctor. There are so many intelligent, brilliant, passionate, good minds out there that come through the Tenement Museum and leave again because the pay isn't sustainable, because the institution does not protect workers of color, and because the institution does not commit to caring about its workers.

Wait: I'm certainly afraid for my job security. There's a lot of job insecurity, but I don't have to be silent about that and at least I can be transparent with my manager and say, "I'm insecure about my job."

Three weeks after the interview, Wait announced that she would be resigning from her position, effective August 28, 2020.

Walber: I have another job, and my other job is booming because it's online events, so I'm okay. I'm both cautiously optimistic and outraged; that's how I feel right now. R. E. and I both spent last weekend at the Death to Museums Conference online, and there were some really depressing but also really fascinating and positive presentations there. I think that people are beginning to understand that for museums to be worthwhile places, they have to be bottom-up institutions that do something positive with the public's trust.

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I interviewed Erin Reid separately on August 10, 2020, via Zoom, after Fulton, Wait, and Walber suggested that she could provide important insights into how the Tenement Museum had addressed antiracist, social justice work in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder on May 25, and during collective bargaining.

Erin Reid: I was an educator at the museum for a little over two years and the co-facilitator of the People of Color Caucus this past year. I was laid off in July.

Urban: Is the Anti-Racism Caucus the same as the People of Color Caucus or are those separate entities?

Reid: These are two separate caucuses. There's the People of Color Caucus and then there's the White Anti-Racism Allies Caucus. We call them both Anti-Racism working groups or caucuses interchangeably.

I was not at the museum when the caucuses were founded. It was about five or a little more than five years ago that they were founded. The People of Color Caucus sprung out of a baseline need of workers who were thinking, "Here we are at this predominantly white institution." It was a space to process what that looked and felt like, together in a collective. But then also to create actionable items around how to make the museum do more anti-racist work in a lot of different ways.

It's unique, I think, from so many other museums, because it was always a bottom-up collective process. When the caucuses began, they were not sanctioned by the museum. People were not allowed to meet on site.

When Kevin Jennings came in as the new president [in the summer of 2017], he agreed to let caucuses meet on site. Also, he established a small fund for the [caucus] facilitators to be paid for five hours of work each month. We were doing so much more work than five hours a month, but it was recognition. It went in the employee handbook and became formalized. With the caucuses, while the timeline doesn't totally match up, they're similar [to unionization] in that both groups were meeting offsite to think about labor practices. It was exciting, in the People of Color Caucus, to think about how the union could formalize anti-racist commitments and codify policies.

Urban: When Morris Vogel returned as president after Jennings left, what did he make of the caucuses? During his first term as president, which lasted from 2008 to 2017, they were not permitted, correct?

Reid: We, myself and Yasmine Raouf, who's the co-facilitator of the People of Color caucus, reached out to him and said, "hey, we've existed since you were president, but this is what it looks like now, things are different." He sort of just let it be and didn't really interfere.

Urban: What initiatives or other action items were expressly stated as goals of the People of Color caucus?

Reid: Hiring was a huge one. Also, content and our interpretation. Since the museum's inception, workers of color have asked, "why aren't we interpreting these stories?" The caucuses were really vocal in saying, "let's reinterpret this history through a Black lens. Let's consider other narratives."

It also became a group to deal with interpersonal things that came up. Micro-aggressions. And related to that, the caucuses encouraged more anti-racist trainings for the whole staff.

Urban: Tenants vacated 97 Orchard Street in 1935, when the building closed as a residency, which means that all the tours in that building are pre-1935. With the opening of 103 Orchard Street, were there any research initiatives that sought to use the new building—and its connections to the history of the Lower East Side in the post-World War Two era—as an opportunity to expand the museum's interpretive coverage?

Reid: It definitely became a renewed focus. The opening of 103 [Orchard Street] opened up questions of who is our audience? I think a lot of the Tenement Museum's imagined audience was understood to be a very white, homogenous audience. With the Under One Roof tour in 103 Orchard, we started having conversations about what it would mean for us to try to actively bring in more people of color to the museum, and for these visitors to see themselves represented in these stories of migration and immigration. And then we started to think, okay, so now we're telling more diverse stories, we need to have more diverse people telling these stories. You can't just be a predominantly white institution anymore.

I was not there for the development of the tour, but there were a lot of educators who were advocating for more control over the research. And more decision power around how the content was developed and formulated, and not just having white people write the content. We wanted people of color to do the interviewing and the research that go into a tour at the museum. I know that there was a small writing committee that management elected to help with that process. And I think a People of Color caucus at the time was pretty involved in advocating for control over that.

Urban: That's really interesting to hear because one of the things that came up when I was talking with R. E., Jackie, and Daniel, was that educators can take a tour and shape it to be more reflective of histories that don't get addressed. But

what you're describing sounds like integrating these perspectives on a more structural and formal basis.

Reid: Right. Which has always been resisted. And even though there was a writing committee on the "Under One Roof" tour they didn't have much power and it was, "Okay, you guys get to see what we've done and say if it's okay or not." Even though the post-1935 focus of 103 Orchard opened up a lot of different historic residences and more stories of people of color, it also helped us reflect on the pre-1935 era and ways that we can interpret a tour like "Irish Outsiders" [focused on Irish immigrants in the 1860s]. Educators interpret that tour and say, "Well, we need to talk about the Draft Riots." We have this city directory that we use with Joseph Moore [a white Irish immigrant who lived in 97 Orchard Street] and in it and there's a Black Joseph Moore who's listed as "colored." We can't just show that record and not talk about that history and how whiteness was constructed with Blackness.[12]

There are a lot of interactions, especially with predominantly Black and brown students from New York City school groups who are coming to the museum, where educators are the ones doing this really creative restructuring of the tour. A lot of kids who came on my tour would ask, "Why does this matter to me?" And it was so important for me to be able to respond, "Well, it does matter. And here are some reasons why." I think that was often the case especially coming from educators of color.

And even though the kids wouldn't always read me as a Black person, I'd be like, "Okay, well this is my history too. So, let's talk about that." And so that was so important just to be able to have that control. But we weren't supposed to talk about a lot of this. Sometimes people would be observed learning Irish Outsiders and managers would be like, "Well, why are you talking about the draft riots? Why are you talking about slavery?"

Urban: Why has the Tenement Museum not hired employees that reflect the diversity of the city? Is this a Tenement Museum problem? Is this problem of cultural institutions more broadly?

Reid: I got my start in museums at the Rubin Museum. Basically, an unpaid internship. I got paid like $300 a month. Those financial constraints map on to race. Also, you need to not just consider education and former work experience in your hiring practices, you need to think about lived experience, especially at a place that deals in storytelling, right? And then management is even more white. You've got implicit bias in interviews and who is seen as a successful candidate.

12 On March 27, 2021, the Tenement Museum announced that it is developing a new permanent exhibit that will tell the story of the Black Joseph Moore listed in the city directory and explore the history of Black New Yorkers in the nineteenth century more broadly. The announcement includes no mention of the work that the caucuses did in advocating for this content. See https://www.tenement.org/rebuild-retell-renew.

Urban: Could you recount what happened with the museum's statement that was issued after the murder of George Floyd on May 25?

Reid: After George Floyd's murder, the museum was silent. We were seeing this uprising happen and here's this institution that supposedly cares about equality and all these big words that they always use. But the president and management, no one released any statements. Finally, on June 2, Vogel released a statement that was incredibly broad, and was not actionable at all.

It didn't tie why what was happening matters to the Tenement Museum. It did not mention anti-Blackness or the violence of policing. And so even though our initial letter [that the People of Color caucus had begun drafting], was, "Hey, you guys should say something and implicate yourself," we changed the framing to, "Okay, you've written something and it's not adequate." We sent it out to former and current employees at the Tenement Museum to sign it. It was basically asking the museum to issue a different statement and lay out a plan for antiracist work going forward.

We got a lot of signatures. We sent it off to the president and senior management and they wrote back, "We'll release another statement, but you guys should write it."

We got back together and there's maybe nine of us. Most of us were women of color, but then we also got representatives from the White Anti-Racist caucus, and they're also furloughed. Of the nine people, only two of the people writing the statement were still employed by the museum. One of them was one of the co-facilitators of White Antiracist caucus, Grace McGookey. The other was Yasmine, the co-facilitator of People of Color caucus.

Grace and Yasmine were the only ones that management communicated with, as if they were the only ones writing the revised statement. Management admitted, "Oh, we know that other people are working on it, who aren't being paid right now." But they chose not to include us in this discussion. We sent a draft of what we had to management, and they got back to us with severe edits and [the comment], "Well, if you're okay with this, let us know in a few hours."

At that point we were like, "Okay, well, let's just let them release this edited statement." Even with the edits, it's still the most actionable and clear statement they've ever released about antiracism. We'll pick our battles. They published that on the website, sent it to the newsletter [on June 12], and posted it on Instagram. That was the story of how it came to be.

Urban: There was no mention of authorship or anything discussing that this was collectively authored by these caucuses?

Reid: The implication was that [Vogel] or management wrote it because there was no acknowledgement of our work at all.

Urban: On Twitter, the union posted a photo showing the museum's doors boarded up, and somebody drew a comparison between the Brooklyn Museum, which had opened its doors to protestors. What else could the museum have done?

Reid: I reached out to management after seeing the open-your-lobby movement on social media. I sent an email to someone in senior management saying, "Hey, maybe we should open up." I'm sure that furloughed workers would have volunteered their time to offer supplies, to help sanitize the bathrooms, et cetera. The response that I received was, "We're not doing that, but we're going to consider getting porta-potties for Juneteenth, in case it's chaotic." Absolutely deranged.

Then on Juneteenth, they did not even get porta-potties. They didn't even follow up on that. What museums were boarding up? The [establishments] we saw boarding up were these really fancy shops.

It was a sign that the museum sees protesters as antagonizers, as violent, and the museum as a target. I have idealistic views of what museums could and should do, especially a museum like the Tenement Museum, which is so rooted in a place. The museum says, "We're all about the Lower East Side and New York history." But when it comes to offering material support to said people they're not interested.

Urban: When it comes to making sure that the museum has Black educators, Black managers, and people of color represented in these units, what would you like to see when the museum is finally able to reopen?

Reid: There are so many things I'd like to see. I don't buy that they're going to rehire us back. And a lot of the people of color who were active in the caucus have said, "I'm not going back to that place." Even if they did rehire from the pool of former educators, they're a lot of people of color that are not going to go back.

We're just not paid enough to deal with the bullshit that we handle. I want more Black educators, especially because we have a new walking tour about Black history in lower Manhattan. And there are two Black people left at the museum who are going to be giving that tour. One big thing that I've been advocating for was that the museum [form] more substantive partnerships with organizations on the Lower East Side and in lower Manhattan in general, that are run by people of color and for people of color. It's repairing relationships with the Black Gotham Experience [an organization run by a former museum educator and focused on the Black historical experience in Manhattan].[13] It's about reaching out to people who are already doing this kind of historical work.

Urban: How are you doing after getting laid off? What have you done to cope and survive?

Reid: I'm exhausted. I've been very angry, very frustrated, and very exhausted. All this work that I put into the museum and it feels like it's all gone. All these gains are lost, so that's how I'm feeling. I'm feeling very over museums at the moment.

13 In early April, the Tenement Museum co-sponsored a symposium titled "Black Communities on the Lower East Side," which featured Kamau Ware, the founder of the Black Gotham Experience, as one of the speakers.

To cope, I think I've been trying to think more broadly about the skills that we have, which I think are really important skills. Trying to remind myself that that bringing historic narratives to the present day doesn't have to happen at the Tenement Museum alone, and that there are people I could link up with and form more collective structures.

Urban: I'm inspired to hear that you're still organizing despite all of these obstacles, challenges and difficulties. Is there anything I missed that you want to talk about?

Reid: With this new walking tour about Black history [titled *Reclaiming Black Spaces* by the museum], they scheduled a meeting for educators after the layoffs. We decided to go, but they had no real plan for how it's going to work and who's going to give it and what training will be. It's like, "Okay, you've made all these commitments really publicly, erased all this work that's been done over many years, and now you're telling Black stories and more." I think that it will be debuting next spring. I don't believe it's going to happen, but if it does, I would like more people to be aware of what the process of creating that tour has looked like for workers. Management asked us to "stay involved" in the tour process at the meeting that took place, but without any plan for future compensation.

As of March 2021, the Tenement Museum has not yet listed the Black history tour that Reid discussed as part of its programming offerings. The museum's website now includes a section titled "Anti-Racism Progress Report" (https://www.tenement.org/about-us/commitment-to-anti-racism/), which acknowledges the work done by the People of Color Caucus and the White Anti-Racist Allies Caucus and apologizes for the harm that the museum's initial statement, issued in June 2020 after Floyd's murder, caused. According to the website, the museum has established four working groups focused on Equitable Hiring and Retention, Training and Resources, Community Relationships, and Accountability, which will share reports with the public every three months. However, as an update from December 2020 notes, "In December, the Museum underwent additional staff reductions as we continue to respond to this unprecedented time, decreasing the numbers of staff members who were actively engaged in these projects." On the website, there is no mention of the union or its contract.

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