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Wing Luke Museum staff strike in protest of anti-Palestinian rhetoric in new exhibit



Wing Luke Museum workers said they went on strike in solidarity with Palestine. They have produced an art series uplifting the connections between the labor movement and the liberation of Asian Palestinian communities, including this photo. Image courtesy of Wing Luke Museum workers

This past Wednesday, May 22, almost half the staff of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience walked out in protest of [its upcoming exhibit “Confronting Hate Together,”](#) saying that some of its text panels contained anti-Palestinian rhetoric that conflated antisemitism with opposition to Zionism and the state of Israel. They claim the exhibit is contrary to the community-oriented pr

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Wing Luke Museum, which is the largest pan-Asian and pan-Pasifika museum in the country. The workers said they took the extraordinary step to go on strike in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza who are facing war and genocide at the hands of the Israeli military.

The exhibit, which discussed racism faced by Seattle's Black, Asian and Jewish communities, was the result of a joint partnership between [The Black Heritage Society of Washington State](#), [The Washington State Jewish Historical Society](#) and the [Wing Luke Museum](#). It was set to launch the day of the walkout.

On May 19, 26 employees signed a letter to Wing Luke Museum executives expressing their concerns about the exhibit and demanding it be reworked. As of Saturday May 25, 22 museum workers were participating in the [wildcat strike](#) out of a total staff of about 50. Most of the workers who participated in the stoppage are in part-time or lower-level, non-managerial roles. Since May 22, the museum has remained closed due to a lack of staffing.

The specific language at the heart of the controversy [was in a text panel titled "The oldest hatred — its newest form,"](#) which included an explicit association between anti-Jewish racism and anti-Zionism. Its first sentence originally read: "Today, antisemitism is often disguised as anti-Zionism, with Jews everywhere expected to defend the actions of Israel's right-wing government." It also included a reference to the ongoing pro-Palestine college student protests, saying that campus groups have voiced support for Hamas and called for "the erasure of Israel" by using the slogan "from the river to the sea."



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One of the Wing Luke Museum employees, who spoke to me on behalf of their coworkers under the condition of anonymity, said staff were deeply concerned by the anti-Palestinian bias of the text panel.

“Palestinians are part of the community that we serve at the Wing Luke Museum, which is Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders,” the worker said. “We’re responsible for their stories just as much as any group.”

The employee also said that many of the workers, who have family members who are immigrants and refugees and have been impacted by U.S. imperialism, felt a deep connection to Palestinians.

The workers formulated four demands to the Wing Luke Museum: The removal any language that could frame anti-Zionism or Palestinian liberation as antisemitic, the inclusion of broader perspectives in the exhibit including Palestinian, Muslim and Arab voices, a requirement for the museum's Community Advisory Committee to be involved in pop-up exhibits like "Confronting Hate Together" and the prioritizing of voices that align with the museum's values of opposition to racism, capitalism and colonialism.

The workers said that meeting the demands would help rebuild trust with the community that was broken due to the exhibit's anti-Palestinian language. While museum executives have made revisions to the text panel's language, the anonymous worker said the striking workers still don't find it acceptable.

A representative for the Wing Luke Museum could not be reached by publication time. On Instagram, [the museum published a post May 24](#) saying that it supports "the right for our staff to express their beliefs and personal truths" and was engaging in dialogue with employees who walked out. The museum has also continued to pay the wages of the workers on strike for the days of May 23 and 24.

The Wing Luke Museum workers who went on strike are not represented by a union, which is unusual. The vast majority of work stoppages in the U.S. are organized under guidelines set by federal or state labor laws. According to [the National Labor Relations Act](#), non-represented workers still have rights to go on strike for the purposes of collective bargaining or mutual protection. It is unclear whether the current walkout could fall under that definition.

However, even if this wildcat strike isn't explicitly protected, it is up to the Wing Luke Museum to decide how to respond. So far, the anonymous employee said executive staff have been respectfully engaging with the 22 workers who walked out. They were optimistic that the museum's leadership would meet their demands.

“Museums are intrinsically political,” they said. “We hope that the museum leadership listens not only to the staff, but to the overwhelming community support. Because this issue is complex for Asian Americans; it’s complex for a lot of different marginalized groups. We’re all in this together.”

Since October 7, the anonymous worker said the Wing Luke Museum has remained relatively silent on violence on the ongoing violence against Palestinians in Gaza, including at one point signing onto a letter that referred to the situation as a “conflict in the Middle East.” The worker said most staff were surprised when they found out about the contents of the “Confronting Hate Together” exhibit on May 14.

Part of the reason for the surprise is because the Wing Luke Museum usually operates through a collaborative curation process in which community members can provide input and ideas through the Community Advisory Committee. This process has garnered the Wing Luke Museum widespread acclaim, like for [the 2022 exhibit “Resisters,”](#) which highlighted the interconnection between the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans and other racialized communities that have experienced state violence in the U.S. That protocol was not followed for the “Confronting Hate Together” exhibit.



The Wing Luke Museum has been closed since the staff walkout started on May 22. Photo by Guy Oron

“The staff were concerned that our museum — which was held up to the standard of being in touch with the community and sharing its stories and having them very involved — that we weren’t doing that in this particular exhibit,” the anonymous worker said.

The anonymous employee added that the omission of Palestinian, Arab and Muslim Americans from “Confronting Hate Together” was glaring since Palestine is in Asia and those communities have experienced an uptick in racist violence since October 7.

“This is a Wing Luke Museum responsibility; to be very intentional and careful about what we say in our organization,” they said.

Joseph Lachman, a community organizer within Seattle’s Asian American community, said he was disappointed when he found out about the anti-Palestinian language in the “Confronting Hate Together” exhibit.

“This really is a slap in the face to just so many of the partner organizations who have worked with the museum to try and make sure that the museum is able to represent different points of view,” Lachman said.

Lachman, who is of Japanese American and European Jewish heritage, added that he wished the exhibit had platformed the views anti-Zionist and Asian Jews. He said he would be canceling his membership with the Wing Luke Museum due to its decision to publish the anti-Palestinian language.

“I think it’s really frustrating,” Lachman said. “It comes all the way back around to a really unfair labeling that any kind of work that is in support of Palestine is somehow conflated with being antisemitic when really, Jewish protesters against genocide are some of the most harshly targeted by Zionists as well as law enforcement. It really plays into some of the messaging that we’ve seen from some of the Zionist, genocide-enabling organizations like the Anti-Defamation League.”

The exhibit’s clumsy association of anti-Zionism with antisemitism is not an isolated incident. Indeed, it is [a widely document practice of Israel supporters](#) to label speech critical of Israel as antisemitic.

“Confronting Hate Together” contains material from its predecessor, [a 2022 exhibit that was developed by the American Jewish Committee \(AJC\)](#) in New York City. Contrary to its name, the majority of AJC’s work is related to pro-Israel advocacy. The group was [criticized by progressive Jews](#) after it tried to get the King County Council to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism last year. The IHRA definition, which was codified in 2016 with a list of confusing examples, has been pilloried by hundreds of scholars [as being designed to muddy the waters between antisemitism and anti-Zionism](#). In addition to AJC’s help, “Confronting Hate Together” exhibit has also [received support from the Anti-Defamation League](#).



The Wing Luke Museum has had to close due to the walkout, May 24. Photo by Guy Oron

While the Wing Luke Museum staff who are on strike clarified they weren't criticizing outside organizations, they said they cannot accept the museum platforming any speech that incites hatred against Palestinians. They said they were acting in solidarity with the larger movement for Palestinian liberation.

"As an arts and culture institution, we have a responsibility to be leading in solidarity for the broader movement," the anonymous worker said. "And because we aren't, the staff want to hold the leadership accountable for that. We hope that they see that the community — at least from what we've experienced in the last day since we've gone public — has been overwhelmingly supportive."

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