

## **GULF LABOR COALITION**

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### **Guggenheim Breaks Off Negotiations with Gulf Labor**

On April 13, 2016, Guggenheim Board of Trustees unilaterally severed negotiations with the Gulf Labor Coalition (GLC). In a conference call, the Guggenheim<sup>1</sup> informed GLC that they will no longer meet with us, nor listen to our proposals about the living and working conditions of the workers who are and will be building museums in Abu Dhabi.

On April 17, 2016, Richard Armstrong, Director of the Guggenheim Museum, sent an email to artists, art critics, curators, and museum directors all over the world describing GLC as a group that “continues to shift its demands,” is “continuing to spread mistruths,” and uses “deliberate falsehoods.”<sup>2</sup> He insisted that no work had begun on the Abu Dhabi site, a recurring claim that GLC has already challenged.<sup>3</sup>

GLC has a long history of thinking creatively about how to advance dialogue with the Guggenheim and Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC: Abu Dhabi), about demands that are foundational to building a global museum on Saadiyat. The core demands (Living Wages, Recruitment Debts, Worker Representation) were formulated since the announcement of the artist boycott of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi in 2011, and were included in multiple letters to the Guggenheim.<sup>4</sup>

GLC has published research reports, analyzed each Pricewaterhouse Cooper (PwC) monitoring report, invited NGOs and labor organizations (e.g., ILO, HRW, ITUC) to join discussions, and initiated multiple meetings with Guggenheim. In response to all this work by GLC, statements by the museum made it clear that the Guggenheim is not serious about dialogue with artist groups towards fair labor standards

The GLC negotiation team regrets that Guggenheim has broken off negotiations in a hostile manner. Despite our show of good faith by maintaining a moratorium on protests for a year, and despite Guggenheim’s own public statements about constructive dialogue, the museum has rescinded and closed the path to working with rights organizations, ready to help create workable frameworks for guaranteeing workers’ rights.

### **GLC & NGO Coalition’s Meeting with Guggenheim (Feb 2016)**

GLC spent the first half of 2015 requesting a meeting with the Trustees, to no avail. Only after a May Day occupation of the Guggenheim New York, and the Peggy Guggenheim in Venice, did they finally agree to meet with GLC. We had meetings with Guggenheim on June 3 (attendees included, for the first time after many requests, Guggenheim Board Chairman William Mack and President Jennifer Blei Stockman) and September 15, 2015 (attendees included Board member Stephen Robert). We then requested a “summit” level meeting between GLC, Guggenheim, and several organizations with global

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<sup>1</sup> Represented by Juan Ignacia Vidarte (Deputy Director and Chief Officer for Global Strategies), Tina Vaz (Deputy Director, Global Communications), and Hanan Sayyed Worrell (Guggenheim senior representative in Abu Dhabi).

<sup>2</sup> <http://hyperallergic.com/291594/guggenheim-breaks-off-negotiations-with-gulf-labor-over-migrant-rights/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://gulflabor.org/2015/construction-of-the-guggenheim-abu-dhabi-has-not-yet-begun-a-response/>

<sup>4</sup> See detailed list of work between 2010-16: [http://gulflabor.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Gulf\\_Labor\\_Timeline\\_April18.pdf](http://gulflabor.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Gulf_Labor_Timeline_April18.pdf)

expertise capable of helping Guggenheim meet international labor and rights standards. We were told the earliest a meeting could happen was six months later in February 2016. As a gesture of good faith, GLC continued a moratorium on public actions (since May 2015) while negotiations were ongoing.

GLC assembled an NGO coalition for the February meeting. These organizations brought expertise in labor, migration, human rights, and construction in the Gulf. Their members were: Fiona Murie (Building and Woodworkers' International), Jill Wells (Engineers Against Poverty), Sarah Leah Whitson (Human Rights Watch), Jeffrey Vogt (International Trade Union Confederation), Shilkha Silliman Bhattacharjee (Society for Labor and Development). The Guggenheim team was led by Richard Armstrong and Trustee John Calicchio. A significant aspect of the meeting was the NGO coalition's view that what was transpiring in the Gulf would fall under the umbrella of "Human Trafficking" or "Forced Labor."

At the end of what appeared to us as a productive three-hour meeting, we sent a letter to the Board with two concrete proposals:

- 1) To initiate, as of April 1, 2016, a meeting every two weeks between GLC, our NGO partners, and representatives from the Guggenheim Museum, the Board of Trustees, and TDIC.
- 2) At these meetings, propose revisions to TDIC's EPP in 5 areas: i) Living Wages; ii) Recruitment Debt; iii) Worker Representation; iv) Accountability for Sub-Contracting Tiers; v) Enforcement of existing and future provisions; and vi) Robust Monitoring.

### **Guggenheim Breaks Off Negotiations (Apr 2016)**

On April 13th we were told that the museum leaders feel that the museum has always conducted themselves in "a spirit of goodwill," in contrast to GLC's "antagonistic" conduct with "demands [that] are simply escalating."<sup>5</sup> The museum staff then told us that our proposals lie "outside of their reach," as they are "matters of state." Even though we left the February meeting feeling optimistic, we were now informed that "the tenor of the last meeting was not productive," nor is the "general pattern of your behavior." This is in spite of the fact that the core demands (Living Wages, Recruitment Debts, Worker Representation) were consistently included in multiple letters to the Guggenheim since 2011.

The upshot, in Guggenheim's view, is that meetings have begun "to generate unrealistic expectations." Consequently, the Guggenheim did not wish to have any more in-person meetings with GLC and the rights organizations. This was followed by Richard Armstrong's email sent to curators, critics, and artists on April 17, which called us a group that uses "deliberate falsehoods." Armstrong's latest email matches accusations he also made against GLC in August 2015, when he sent an email to GLC describing us as people who "distort the facts and peddle mistruths" and use "deliberate falsehoods"<sup>6</sup>.

### **GLC's Track Record**

GLC and allied groups G.U.L.F., Taxi Worker's Alliance, S.a.L.E. Docks, Fair Labor Coalition, WBYA, and others carried out protests since 2011 that were reported by the global press. What is less widely reported are the research, fact finding trips, and meetings by GLC to find solutions. Our members have carried out several fact-finding missions to the Saadiyat labor camps. In addition, we prepared analysis of PwC reports on labor conditions on Saadiyat, and made these reports public. No corresponding

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<sup>5</sup> Conference call with Guggenheim, April 13, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Email from Richard Armstrong to Andrew Ross on behalf of GLC, August 12, 2015

public analysis of PwC reports was forthcoming from Guggenheim or TDIC.

GLC initiated an average of two annual meetings with Guggenheim since 2011. These were attended by various Guggenheim staff, including Richard Armstrong, Sarah Austrian, Hanan Worrell, Reem Fadda, Suzanne Cotter, and Nancy Spector. Some meetings were also attended by TDIC members Bassem Terkawi and Rita Aoun Abdo. Unfortunately, the departure of multiple staff (Cotter, Spector, Terkawi) disrupted consistent dialogue.

In 2011, we introduced the Guggenheim to the Institute for Human Rights in Business (IHRB) and suggested they take IHRB's consultative advice. In 2014, GLC urged Guggenheim to invite International Labor Organization (ILO) to join Guggenheim and TDIC for negotiations. In 2015, we introduced working models of fair labor practices in the UAE that Guggenheim could build upon (the carpenters' union project). ITUC and Human Rights Watch invited Guggenheim to discuss measures for protecting labor rights. Guggenheim did not respond positively to any of these invitations.

### **Guggenheim's Track Record**

The Guggenheim seems to be pursuing a self-destructive path, putting institutional hubris and PR needs<sup>7</sup> before migrant labor rights. Guggenheim appears to have agreed to meetings with GLC to stave off negative press following UAE travel bans on three GLC members<sup>8</sup>, and the May occupations of the Guggenheim in NY and Peggy Guggenheim in Venice. Now that the press has moved on, Guggenheim has broken off communication with GLC. This is institutional power that treats the labor force building museums, and the artists involved in museums, as disposable and replaceable.

Many of our signatories have long-standing working relationships with the Guggenheim. We are saddened to see a once prominent New York institution damage their global reputation, and goodwill among artists, by refusing to take legal and ethical responsibilities for a building that carries its name. The Guggenheim is following the same path NYU took in silencing critics, until a New York Times story on worker abuse forced the university to begin the process of paying reparations to workers.

Faced with a concrete and optimistic path forward, the Guggenheim chooses to focus on distracting issues like our "antagonistic" tone, avoiding the more relevant facts on the ground: the bodies, lives, and dreams of thousands of workers who are accumulating massive recruitment debts, being cheated on wages, exploited by corrupt contractors and subcontractors, denied any meaningful collective representation, and forced to live out of sight and under watch.

### **On behalf of the Gulf Labor Coalition (organizing committee):**

Amin Husain, Andrew Ross, Ashok Sukumaran, Ayreen Anastas, Doris Bittar, Doug Ashford, Eric Baudelaire, Gregory Sholette, Guy Mannes-Abbott, Haig Aivazian, Hans Haacke, Joseph Rauch, Kristina Bogos, Mariam Ghani, Michael Rakowitz, Naeem Mohaiemen, Natascha Sadr Haghigian, Nitasha Dhillon, Noah Fischer, Paula Chakravartty, Rene Gabri, Sam Durant, Shaina Anand, Tania Bruguera, Walid Raad.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://gulflabor.org/2015/guggenheim-email-leak/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://gulflabor.org/?s=travel+ban> and <http://gulflabor.org/2015/investigator/>