

Noguchi Museum Staff Walk Out in Protest of Keffiyeh Ban

Posted by Phyllis Chesler from the [Hyperallergic Magazine](#) for the Arts

At least 14 workers of the Noguchi Museum in New York City, including all nine front-facing staff, are participating in a work stoppage today, Wednesday, August 21, in protest of a policy that prohibits employees from wearing the Palestinian headscarves known as *keffiyehs*.

Last week, over 50 workers – more than two-thirds of the museum's 72-person staff – signed an internal petition calling for the policy to be reversed, citing the anti-Palestinian sentiment of the decision amid Israel's ongoing attacks on Gaza as well as concerns over potential damage to the museum's reputation and credibility.

"Our Astoria community is incredibly diverse, and features a high population of Palestinians," reads the petition text, which *Hyperallergic* reviewed. "Banning the keffiyeh, a culturally significant garment, sets a strong precedent for the institution."



This is the keffiyeh worn by the gallery attendant. (photo used with permission)

In a collective statement shared with *Hyperrallergic*, the workers also allege that the museum singled out a Black employee for their use of the keffiyeh, compounding the impact of

a policy they say is discriminatory.

The worker in question, a gallery attendant at the museum for over three years, was called into a spontaneous private meeting with Director Amy Hau and an HR representative on Wednesday morning . . . was surprised by both the informal nature of the meeting and Hau's request that they stop wearing their keffiyeh. In the spring, the worker had been asked to remove a "Free Palestine" hat because it went against a museum dress code rule banning text and images; they complied.

By contrast, their keffiyeh, which bore an abstract black-and-white fishnet pattern and the red and green colors of the

Palestinian flag, did not appear to violate those terms.

"I felt very caught off guard and ambushed," the worker said. "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."

A few weeks earlier, their supervisor had notified them that a photo of them wearing the keffiyeh was circulating on social media and that the museum had received email complaints. But the supervisor was supportive and did not ask them to remove it, according to the worker.

Last Wednesday morning, however, Hau sent the worker home after they refused to take off the scarf.

Later that afternoon, the director communicated to staff onsite that "political dress" was prohibited because it made some guests feel "unsafe" and "uncomfortable" and because it could put workers at risk.

Heads of different departments expressed their concern during a monthly all-staff meeting the next morning that "ended in tears," according to a statement from the workers participating in today's work stoppage.

The museum was closed from Friday, August 16 through the weekend, a decision communicated by leadership in an email as "an opportunity to reset and recharge."

A statement from the museum sent in response to *Hyperallergic's* request for comment said the institution has a responsibility "to foster a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment for all staff and visitors. . . . Recently, concerns were raised about a staff member wearing a keffiyeh while at work at the Museum," the statement read. "While we understand that the intention behind wearing this garment was to express personal views, we recognize that such

expressions can unintentionally alienate segments of our diverse visitorship.”

Read it all [here](#).