Read the November 5 Open Letter from Concerned AAWW Staff and Union [here](). To add your name to this letter, please [use this form]().

See the Board's [November 7 response]() and their [November 14 response]().
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STATEMENT BY THE AAWW UNION TO THE AAWW BOARD

Delivered at a Zoom meeting attended by Board Members and AAWW Staff, November 13, 2025.

Thank you to the AAWW Board for agreeing to meet with us today.

As we all know, on Oct. 24, AAWW Executive Director Jafreen Uddin laid off two of the three remaining editors of our award-winning, community-centered literary magazine, *The Margins*.

This latest round of layoffs follows three years of organizational turmoil, high staff turnover, and low morale.

These layoffs feel like an act of Union-busting and an act of retaliation. All positions slated for elimination are Union positions, despite the relatively small cost savings that won't even make up for the $200,000 shortfall the Workshop is facing. We have cause to believe that Jafreen is laying off two of the three Union members in retaliation for filing grievances, asking questions about who she answers to, and making sure that she follows our Collective Bargaining Agreement.

We will now proceed to answer the letter the Board sent us on November 7.

Financial Context and Transparency

The Board writes: The Workshop's leadership has remained fully transparent with staff about the financial difficulties, including hosting multiple staff meetings to share the exact grants lost and efforts being made to recoup lost revenue.

Our response: The Workshop's leadership has *never been forthcoming* with information regarding the Workshop's finances. No one on staff, not even the Deputy Director, has ever seen the full budget. For the entirety of the ED's tenure, she has never voluntarily shared any *explicit or written information* about fundraising results.

An incomplete list of fundraising efforts for which we have been given incomplete information follows:

- 2023 New York Diwali Gala at Mandarin Oriental Hotel
- 2024 fundraising gala at Hana House

- fundraising dinners
- Grants applied to
- Grants lost
- Grants rejected from
- AAWW Fan Club signups

As the workers whose livelihoods keep being affected by the failure to secure adequate funding, it only made sense that after each layoff or departure at the Workshop, the Union would request more budget transparency. Each request would either be denied or only partly answered. Requests to meet and communicate with the Board were similarly stonewalled. We were even blocked from seeing the agenda of Board meetings.

Whatever scraps of information we've presented here is a result of us *persistently and repeatedly asking*, sometimes for years. The "multiple staff meetings" that leadership hosted regarding the budget were direct results of multiple asks by the Union through every channel available to us. Nothing about that was forthcoming.

Clarifying the Numbers

The Board states:
The figures cited about revenue and compensation were drawn from unadjusted IRS Form 990s, which are limited, retrospective documents that do not present a complete picture of the organization's current or overall financial health.

Our response:
Thank you for bringing up that the numbers we are referencing from 2023 are "limited… documents that do not present a complete picture." This is exactly what we mean when we say we have not been given transparent information. Even at the Budget Meeting on November 11, mandated through a March 2025 Memorandum of Understanding with the Union, Jafreen did not give us information about compensation, in particular whether leadership salary has reflected the dire state of arts funding. Now, you can argue that the ED does not have to disclose this, but you cannot then turn around and tell us that we have incomplete information. We have incomplete information because the ED chooses to give us incomplete information.

As for the comparison between Jafreen's 2023 $116,000 full-time salary versus the lowest-paid staff's $33,000 part-time salary, we will point out that the part time workers have been asking for more hours for at least two years—we do not choose to work part time but thought that everyone was making some sort of sacrifice to keep the organization running, and to keep serving our community. A six-figure salary and outsized raises while we fight for scraps hardly counts as a sacrifice.

Which brings us to another point: Why is the Board giving outsized raises to an Executive whose performance is so lackluster? Whose idea of keeping an organization afloat is pushing so many of the Staff out, that by the time 2026 comes around, there will only be four people left in an organization that used to employ 9?

Leadership and Stewardship

The Board writes:
The Board maintains full confidence in the Executive Director's leadership and in her stewardship of the organization…

Our response:
While we are painfully aware of the steep cuts that all nonprofits are facing, we are surprised and confused about the direction that the ED has taken to shore up our budget. As was mentioned before, these layoffs will not make up for the shortfall. Moreover, this decision will leave *The Margins* with only one editor on staff. This is hardly enough to sustain the magazine, and when we asked Jafreen if she was planning to sunset *The Margins*, she replied, "Maybe." This nonchalance about a beloved piece of the community that's been around for almost fifteen years betrays a deep misunderstanding of our community's needs.

One of the workers affected by these layoffs is the person who's been in tenure at the Workshop the longest. Noel Pangilinan has mentored an entire generation of Asian writers, giving them a springboard in a publishing industry that's very difficult for people of color to break into. Our fellows have gone on to do great work after working with Noel; one of them was even a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize. But more than their accolades, what makes our relationship with them so special is the fondness and loyalty they keep for the Workshop years after they've finished their fellowships. Our fellows come back to the Workshop—as exemplified by the Workshop's current Programs Director who was an Open City Fellow in 2019. This kind of loyalty only happens when the people at the organization mentor our fellows with genuine care. It is sick to reward Noel's years of fostering this loyalty among writers with this kind of mistreatment.

The Board writes that the ED has "stabilized operations and sustained the organization's programs…", but Jafreen's tenure has been marked with layoffs and departures: a revolving door of staff that come out traumatized by her leadership. It was Under Jafreen that an employee who had been at the Workshop for a decade resigned, citing that the ED "has no vision for the organization." In 2024, Jafreen hired an employee at the coordinator level, only to lay them off six months later because Jafreen realized the organization couldn't afford an additional coordinator's salary. If she can't make short term budget decisions, how is she planning for the future?

During Jafreen's tenure, the Programs team went from three people to one, and it will be during Jafreen's tenure that the Editorial team will go from four to one. Operations have never been more unstable, morale has never been lower, and our programs have never been fewer. It was during Jafreen's tenure that Mouth 2 Mouth, the Workshop's longest-running program, was unceremoniously shuttered. Our fellowships have been throttled and reduced. This is not belt-tightening, it's suffocation.

If Jafreen knew in April 2025 that things were already dire, why did she not hold an emergency fundraiser then? Why wait until the end of the year, and then why ask for $50,000 when the organization is dealing with a $200,000 shortfall? Why is the ED laying staff off before the biggest fundraising season of the year? Why not do everything she can to fundraise while people are most willing to give, before deciding on layoffs? Why, if her role is to cultivate major donors, do we still have no major donors after her five-year tenure? Why, if healthcare was so expensive that it was threatening to bankrupt the organization, did she not come to the staff so we could all come up with solutions to mitigate costs? Why, if the Workshop was losing grant after grant and if the ED couldn't find major donors, did she not hire Development staff instead of a Programs Coordinator she couldn't afford to pay?

It is unbecoming of a leader to make so many missteps and never admit to her mistakes, never ask for help, and then make the most vulnerable and least-paid staff suffer for her blunders. For a creative arts organization that claims to steward radical ideas about community and care, *there is nothing creative, compassionate, or community-oriented about her solutions*. As of this writing, 370 community members, including donors, former and current staff, fellows, and event readers, have signed our open letter because they understand that the Executive Director's leadership is harmful to the Workshop. They understand that there is no Workshop without the workers. We hope that the Board of Directors can come to this understanding as well.