

Tate UK strikers: “COVID-19 is being used to inflict a jobs massacre”

By Paul Mitchell
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Workers at Tate Enterprises, which provides retail, catering and publishing services at four art galleries in London, Liverpool and St Ives, have been striking against plans to slash more than half of the organisation’s jobs—some 300 workers.

They are warning that the COVID-19 pandemic is being used to inflict unprecedented job cuts, increase restructuring and further privatise the arts and culture sector across the UK.

The workers began striking on August 18, with further days of action that week. From August 24, workers escalated the action beginning an indefinite strike.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with two strikers. Jorge said, “We are striking at Tate Enterprises, which is the commercial arm of the Tate network in the UK. Its profits have been used, along with members’ subscriptions, to support the galleries as government funding has been cut over the years.

“Obviously, Tate took a big hit with the coronavirus pandemic and had to close for a while. It has now re-opened, but visitors have to be pre-book and the galleries are still very quiet.

“To get over the pandemic the government furloughed people and paid a proportion of their wages. It said it would give about £1.5 billion to arts and culture organisations—nearly £7 million for the Tate. However, now the furlough is ending, Tate is using that money to downsize and outsource its operations. It has taken on 18 new Securitas private security guards for example, whilst making us redundant.

“There is a lot of anger. A lot of people have joined the union [the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), led by General Secretary Mark Serwotka]. Around 80 percent took part in the strike ballot and nearly 90 percent voted in favour. That’s a real encouragement for our cause and to force Tate management to change its mind.”

Jorge explained that strikers have received the support

of the 10 artists who have shared the Tate’s prestigious 2020 Turner prize. They have issued a statement declaring those being sacked include “some of the lowest paid, most precarious and most disadvantaged members of the staff at Tate Galleries” and that “the threat of their redundancies directly contradicts Tate’s commitment to ‘champion the richness of art for everyone.’”

Another striker, Anna, interrupted to question the role of the union. “Mr Serwotka says the PCS will go ‘all the way’ to win the strike demands but then added ‘no matter how long it takes.’ That sounds really ominous. Despite the jobs massacre taking place across the country the response is limited.

“Look at the union’s demands. Three pathetic demands. They are begging Tate bosses to reduce the number of redundancies by cutting their own salaries and using some of the emergency bailout, even though the government has made clear it can’t be used to save jobs but can be used for redundancy payments. They are begging the bosses to ‘join with us in demanding the government do more for the sector.’ Fat chance.

“If the bosses at Tate, which is the biggest visitor attraction in Britain, can get away with their redundancies and restructuring and if the Southbank Centre, Europe’s biggest arts complex just down the road, can do the same, then there is little hope for the rest of the country. The unions have a lot to answer for.”

As if to prove Anna’s point, the PCS feebly states that it “continues to press the Department of Digital Media and Sport to provide the additional funding that the sector so desperately needs. But so far, except platitudes in the press, the government has made no meaningful commitment to the sector... Sadly our calls to save our sector have not been heeded and we are now seeing the first large scale redundancies in the sector.”

Elsewhere, the PCS is pleading with the “Royal Family” to not “abandon... in its hour of need” the Royal

Collection Trust (RCT), which looks after the Queen's art treasures, and remember that the RCT "has contributed £80 million in facilities management fees to the cost of running the Royal Household in the past 20 years." The RCT, created by the Queen and chaired by Prince Charles, wants to slash wages by 20 percent and its pension contribution for RCT staff from 15 percent to 8 percent.

As striking worker Anna indicated, The Southbank Centre, comprising the Royal Festival Hall, Hayward Gallery, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Arts Council Collection and National Poetry Library, has announced plans to make up to 68 percent of its workforce redundant—some 400 people out of 577.

According to the "Save Our Southbank" campaign, the Centre will reopen in 2021 with an entirely new "start-up" operating structure. Art exhibitions, classical and contemporary music and literature events will be confined to just 10 percent of the centre's space whilst 90 percent is hived off to private rental.

In London theatreland, billionaire impresario Cameron Mackintosh, producer of musicals including *Oliver!*, *Les Misérables*, *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera* and *Hamilton*, announced that he has "sadly permanently had to shut down" shows and "down-size" over 60 percent of his organisation. He has "had to let go all the actors, musicians, stage staff and freelancers that work for me." This amounts to more than 850 job cuts.

Entertainment union BECTU lamely accused Mackintosh of an "unwillingness to use the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in full," adding sycophantically that other employers "have done their utmost to find creative ways to safeguard the livelihoods of their staff." This is belied by BECTU's own findings, published early this month, that 5,000 theatre jobs have been lost since the pandemic began.

Numerous regional theatres, including in Newcastle, Plymouth and Southampton, have likewise made large redundancies and face permanent closure.

Museum services are also at risk. Sharon Heal, director of the Museums Association, said, "We are deeply concerned about the plight of town and city museums throughout the UK. Local authorities are in a difficult position because of the extra costs associated with dealing with COVID-19 and the prospect of future cuts to their budgets.

"We are already hearing of major local authorities that are considering not funding their museums and galleries because they are non-statutory services. We are deeply

concerned that some museums will not be able to reopen after lockdown."

In a leaked document from the National Trust (NT), entitled "Towards a Ten Year Vision for Places and Experiences," the 5.6 million member organisation, which looks after 300 historic homes and thousands of acres of countryside, reveals it is also planning a "big shift" in order to "dial down" its role as a "major national cultural institution." Some 1,200 full time NT workers face redundancy—about 13 percent of the 9,500 total. There will be a substantial reduction in specialist curators for the NT's vast collection of works of art and furniture, much of which will be put into storage to free up space for "events."

The Johnson government's £1.57 billion coronavirus rescue package for the arts is a token and selective effort, and central to its main goal of reopening the economy.

More fundamentally, its goal is completing the "Thatcher revolution," aimed at ending what remains of publicly run services.

Public support of the Arts was an important result of the post-World War II social gains won by the working class. Just as the National Health Service was to ensure and nurture the health of the population, the 1946 Arts Council's remit was to preserve high art and help develop new art through education and grants. The Southbank Centre was the most visible expression of this ethos.

During the 1980s under the Conservative government, the very concept of state funding for the arts came under attack. Prime Ministers Thatcher and then Major cut social spending across the board. When Tony Blair's New Labour came to power in 1997 its promise to address the growing crisis in the arts and make them more accountable to the "people" provided a smokescreen for increased commercial sponsorship.

Grant in arts funding fell from around £500 million a year under Blair to £325 million under the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and to around £190 million last year under the most right-wing government in post-war British history.

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