

Fight job losses at Liverpool museums

Danny Dickinson—SEP (UK) candidate in the European elections
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A Socialist Equality Party European Elections campaign team were out over the weekend at the Walker Art Gallery and the World Museum in Liverpool, one of the largest cities in the North West of England.

On April 24 museums and arts centres controlled by National Museums Liverpool (NML) in the north west of England were closed for a day, to allow leading members of the government-funded organisation to inform workers that further job cuts would be implemented.

There are no news reports as to what took place at the meeting. Earlier press releases by NML stated that voluntary severance schemes had been taken up by 94 staff but that a further 66 jobs are also to be axed. This makes a total of 160 jobs lost since 2010, a ratio of one in five.

The jobs cull is being carried out alongside other cost-cutting measures including the reduction of activity throughout the NML venues and shelving dozens of projects and programmes. This is in response to the central government's 28 percent cut to funding since 2010.

The danger that one or more of the major venues will close is an ever-increasing possibility. Already the NML-run National Conservation Centre has closed to the public to "ease the effects of cuts to expenditure". A planned reopening of the historic Canning Dock to the public was abandoned and the Titanic gallery at Merseyside Maritime Museum was scaled back.

The trade unions' public response came from Clara Paillard of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS). She is union Branch Chair at NML and President of PCS Culture Sector. Prior to the meeting, in an interview with the *Liverpool Echo*, she said: "Our valuable cultural assets are being cut to the bone by a vicious and economically illiterate government."

"Further cuts on top of those already imposed since 2010 will damage not only staff, visitors and collections but also the wider local economy where £6 is generated for every £1 invested in arts and culture."

Lofty words from Paillard, but they attempt to hide the

facts that the PCS has overseen the destruction of jobs not only at NML but across the whole public sector nationally, as well as accepting wage cuts and reductions to pension entitlements for its membership.

Workers employed at the galleries informed SEP campaigners that they believed the union is taking part in negotiations on voluntary redundancies while "keeping us in the dark."

The venues operated by NML are highly regarded by the public, with 2.7 million people visiting them annually. In 2012 the group celebrated its most successful year ever, seeing 3.2 million visitors across all eight centres.

The Liverpool group is the only national museum group outside of London. It is owned and operated by the government through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The recently renamed World Museum in Liverpool dates back to 1851, holding in trust more than one million objects from a multi-disciplined worldwide collection. It is currently open to the public 361 days of the year.

The Walker Art Gallery, also part of NML, is situated adjacent to it and the Central Library makes up the culture centre in William Brown Street. The Walker Art Gallery dates back to 1877, although its collection was started in 1819. Through various early exhibitions dated around 1871, the then town council was able to purchase works such as WF Yeames' *And when did you last see your father?* and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Dante's Dream*.

The cuts in funding to vital cultural assets take place in the context of massive austerity measures being imposed in Liverpool and throughout the UK. The trade unions have not lifted a finger to oppose any cuts, allowing for massive job losses, cuts in pay and conditions and the loss of many social services. Council-funded cultural events have become one of the major victims.

During the last three years, in line with the diktats of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, Liverpool City Council has cut the city budget by £173 million. Within the next three years it has to make further cuts of £45 million in 2014/15, £63 million 2015/16 and

£48 million in 2016/17. This is a total £156 million.

In early October 2013, Labour Party Mayor of Liverpool Joe Anderson called an emergency meeting, the agenda of which was to discuss the city's budget for the upcoming 2014/15 financial year.

Members of the city council, local Members of Parliament, local trade union leaders and the Police Commissioner were invited to attend. Anderson gave a stark warning that "unless the city cut back all nonessential services, the city will be bankrupt within the next three years". Outlining the seriousness of the proposed measures, he went on to say: "Everything we do in discretionary services would have to stop." Discretionary services are those that the council is not legally bound by parliament to operate.

As well as massive cuts to social welfare projects, Anderson stated that all cultural activity organised by the council was posed, including closing the city's libraries and parks. "[There will be] no libraries, no maintaining of parks, no regeneration or events, everything stops!" Approximately £137.5 million of Liverpool's budget was spent on cultural, regeneration and leisure facilities last year.

In spite of the grim picture, Anderson made it clear there would be no other policy coming from the Mayor's office other than to carry out the government's directives. Deputy Mayor Paul Brant had earlier stated, "We are elected to do the best we can with the cards we are dealt by the government and we have done that."

These issues facing Liverpool are not unique to the city that was crowned the 2008 European Capital of Culture. In June last year it was announced that there was a threat to another North West museum, the Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI), located in the historic Castlefield area of Manchester. MOSI received over 830,000 visitors in 2011/12 and has many exhibits detailing the origins of the industrial revolution. This was fuelled by the development of the cotton industry's factory system, which originated in the city.

The government has announced that the budget of the Department for Culture Media and Sport is to be cut 7 percent and a further 8 percent is scheduled for 2015, and the Labour Party has pledged to honour these cuts should it regain office.

A survey from 2103 by the Museums Association found that:

- 49 percent of responding museums experienced a cut to their overall income
- 23 percent of respondents saw their overall income

decrease by more than 10 percent

- 37 percent of respondents cut staff
- 21 percent of respondents cut staff numbers by over 10 percent
- 47 percent of responding museums increased the numbers of volunteers and interns
- 23 percent of respondents reduced the number of temporary exhibitions
- School visits decreased at 31 percent of respondents
- 28 percent of respondents reduced the free events on offer

While government funding is being slashed the panacea is being doled out that charitable or philanthropic donations will take up the losses.

Already much of the art funding in the UK comes from the National Lottery, meaning that it is essentially being funded by an indirect tax paid by many of the poorest people. Since 1995, Arts Council England has had stewardship responsibility for—and has distributed—£3.5 billion of "new and additional" funds for good causes in the arts from the National Lottery.

The Socialist Equality Party demands an end to all cuts in public spending, including funding for the arts and museums. Art and museum provision should be vastly expanded, not slashed to the bone, so that the cultural heritage of humanity is freely available to all. They must be publicly owned, publicly run, publicly planned and organized.

The working class has the right to culture and art, along with the right to decent jobs, education, health care and housing. These can only be defended through struggle by an independent movement of the working class against the capitalist profit system.



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