

UK National Gallery staff face privatisation

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About 250 staff at London's National Gallery will take strike action from today, for five days, against the privatisation of frontline services. This follows two previous five-day walkouts in February and a strike on the weekend of March 14-15.

The National Gallery stands elevated above Trafalgar Square, distinguished by its classical facade of colonnades. After the British Museum it is the second most visited museum in the UK, with 6 million viewers passing through its doors annually.

Founded in 1824, it houses a collection of 1,824 paintings dating back to the middle of the 13th century. Most major developments in Western painting are represented, with masterpieces by such artists as Jan van Eyck, Leonardo da Vinci, Hans Holbein, J.M.W. Turner and Vincent van Gogh in its collection.

Even though they work at what is a national treasure house, many of the 400 gallery assistants, members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), are not even paid the paltry London Living Wage of £9.15 an hour. Earning around £17,000 per annum means many staff have to take on extra jobs, despite often working 50 or 60 hours a week at the gallery.

The National Gallery is the only major museum or gallery in London that does not pay staff the London Living Wage and will be the first to privatise its visitor services. Two days before the May 7 General Election the tender will go out for this service to security companies like CIS, Serco or G4S.

Serco runs the notorious Yarlswood Immigration Removal Centre near Bedford. G4S achieved notoriety when Angolan national Jimmy Mubenga died after being restrained by three of its security guards.

The present staff work with visitors at the gallery, sit in the rooms, help with enquiries, and arrange educational visits. Though without formal training, they have knowledge about and enthusiasm for the exhibits. Some have been employed there for 40 years, while

many are art students or artists themselves.

When announcing the moves to outsource visitor services, outgoing Director of the National Gallery Nicolas Penny, who has been replaced by Dr. Gabriele Fineldi, said, "The proposed changes are necessary to enable the Gallery to increase income in the face of a reduced grant (by 15 percent) and increasing maintenance and running costs, and to enable it to pay all staff a minimum of the London Living Wage."

As private companies intend to make a profit, outsourcing means attacks on pay and conditions of the employees, and/or charging for more exhibitions. As older staff, who are paid more, leave they will be replaced by younger cheaper employees. Shift patterns will change, and tea breaks and changing into one's uniform will be classed as outside work time and unpaid.

Also at issue is the right of all working people to enjoy free access to art and cultural events.

Over the past four years government funding to the arts in the UK has been cut by 36 percent. While defence gets a 6 percent share of government spending, and this is set to rise in the next parliament, the arts get 0.5 percent.

Conservative Party Chancellor George Osborne announced further cuts of £12 billion in public spending in his recent budget. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, the budget will mean a bigger squeeze on spending than anything seen during the past five years. This will fall heavily on the poorest and most vulnerable, with welfare spending singled out for attack. There is every likelihood the arts will not be spared.

The abysmal pay and moves to privatise services are an indictment of the trade unions. PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka declared that the union had plans that "would resolve the issues at the heart of this dispute so it is very disappointing that the National

Gallery appears unwilling to discuss them.”

The PCS presented a petition signed by 40,000 protesting against the privatisation to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the very people wielding the axe. The main concern of the PCS is not to conduct a serious fight against privatisation, just as it never seriously fought to defend pensions. On their web site the PCS merely calls on all political parties to commit to a moratorium on privatisation until after the election.

At the beginning of the dispute, PCS representative Candy Udwin was suspended for supplying information to the union about the costs of using the security company CIS. The union said Udwin is accused of “breaching commercial confidentiality” by “drafting questions for the union’s full-time negotiations officer to ask the gallery about the cost of using CIS, a private company employed in response to the dispute.”

During the strikes the CIS have been guarding the Sainsbury wing of the Gallery, which houses Renaissance classics. The company won the contract for the late Rembrandt exhibition held last autumn. According to an employee, CIS gave instructions not to help visitors with enquiries.

Udwin is a leading member of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and was on the PCS’s negotiating team at recent talks at conciliation service Acas. She is a member of the PCS’s Association Executive Committee, which according to the PCS “is supported by the PCS negotiation officers and regional organiser working in the culture sector.”

The SWP also has two supporters on the PCS’s National Executive Committee (NEC), who recently issued a statement insisting, “Every PCS activist should be 100 percent behind Mark Serwotka and our union leadership...” Another pseudo-left formation, the Socialist Party, is also represented on the NEC.

The SWP opposes any fight to widen the struggle against cuts in art and cultural institutions. It proposes only that trade union branches invite PCS strikers to speak at their meetings, and ask Members of Parliament to back a campaign against privatisation. This is in the full knowledge that all parliamentary parties, the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats, are committed to austerity and privatisation.

The PCS played a critical role in demobilising a movement against the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. After the Trades Union Congress called off

the mass protests in 2011 against attacks on public sector pensions, the PCS joined other unions like Unite and the National Union of Teachers to wind down all action after several one-day stoppages.

The attempt by the SWP and SP to present the trade unions as organizations that defend the interests of the working class is belied by the fact that members of the PCS have been fighting to no avail since 2010 to increase their miserly pay.

To fight against cuts in spending and privatisations, workers need to build new fighting organisations, independent of the trade unions and based on a socialist programme.



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