

UK: PCS union isolates National Gallery strikers

Allison Smith
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Nearly 250 staff at the UK's National Gallery are more than 100 days into an indefinite strike in opposition to plans to privatise visitor services. They are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

The National Gallery, the fourth most visited museum in the world, is wholly owned by the public and open 361 days a year. It “houses the national collection of paintings in the Western European tradition from the 13th to the 19th centuries”, according to the gallery's web site. Most major developments in Western art 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.

It is free of charge to the public. However, special exhibitions like the recent and remarkable “Rembrandt: The Late Works”, which took six years to prepare, charge an entrance fee priced beyond many working class families.

Calls to restrict access through charging have support within the liberal establishment. The *Guardian's* Jonathan Jones recently penned an article, “The most unsayable truth: museums are not the NHS [National Health Service]—they should charge us”.

Jones wrote, “It may be time for museums in Britain to begin charging for entry. I do not say this lightly. The British—and it is distinctively British, with few equivalents elsewhere—belief that all museums should be free is a remarkable piece of idealism. It means that any of us can walk into our local gallery whenever we like and look at a Turner or even a Leonardo for nothing”.

Since 2008, funding for the arts in the UK has been cut by more than 36 percent and is facing a further 40 percent in cuts by 2020. Moves to put services out to private tender provoked the strike. Gallery management

announced last month that it has retained Swedish-based global conglomerate Securitas AB to manage some visitor-facing and security functions at the museum.

With approximately 300,000 employees operating in 50 countries, Securitas is a publicly traded company that reported a net profit of 1.2 billion Swedish krona in 2014. Company chairman Melker Schörling, with a personal net worth of \$6.5 billion, owns the largest number of shares in the company. In contrast, employees report low wages and poor working conditions.

Securitas employees in the US state of California saw their health care benefits slashed, making basic health services unaffordable for many hospital security officers and their families. Employees in Hawaii voted to unionise in an attempt to improve their working conditions with Securitas.

In a press release, Securitas pledges to enable the National Gallery to operate with “greater flexibility”. This translates into the ability to control, at its discretion, individual staff hours and work locations in order to maximise profits.

Many staff have worked at the gallery for decades and developed an intimate knowledge of its collections. But once they are under the Securitas contract, the company can legally move them anywhere else in the company. Securitas has contracts guarding car parks, airports, shops and offices.

There is nothing preventing the gallery from renegotiating the Securitas contract in future, which could result in even worse working conditions. Workers informed *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that management have promised that staff will remain at the gallery. However, Securitas has refused to write this into the new contracts to be enforced from

November 1.

The PCS, which represents 5,000 in its Cultural Sector, has worked to isolate the strikers. The union has refused to unite all cultural institution workers across England, Scotland and Wales in coordinated all-out strike action.

In August, strike action was threatened but suspended by the PCS at six of the National Museum Wales sites in protest at plans to stop extra payments to weekend and bank holiday staff.

At National Museums Scotland, a seven-day strike was called following the collapse of talks with museum management over weekend pay changes. This created a two-tiered wage structure for those who get allowance because they were employed before 2011 and those who do not.

The PCS worked with museum management to avert the strikes in Wales and to significantly limit the strike in Scotland.

Before the indefinite strike at the National Gallery was launched, the Socialist Workers Party, who have two supporters—Marianne Owens and Paul Williams—on the PCS's National Executive Committee, threw their full support behind the PCS leadership. "Every PCS activist should be 100 percent behind Mark Serwotka [PCS general secretary] and our union leadership", they declared.

Serwotka's much-vaunted plan to "resolve the issues at the heart of the [National Gallery] dispute" turned out to be a token petition to the government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport. This is the same department that has agreed to even more draconian cuts to the arts and culture budget.

In its March 2015 "People's Inquiry" into the "future of the National Gallery", the PCS reassures management that "this dispute was unnecessary" as the union has already "agreed that whatever system is in operation it must be able to guarantee that the Gallery can have the flexible opening hours that they might require".

The crux of the PCS argument is that the attacks on Gallery workers' employment conditions should be negotiated through the union and not with a private company. The report reminds management: "PCS has not opposed the principle of introducing a spot pay rate, even though this would mean no pay progression for staff in these departments".

Further, the PCS reassures management that they "are aware that further strike action can only do damage to the Gallery and its reputation".

One can only conclude from these statements that the PCS is prepared to sell out the strike, as long as their seat at the negotiating table is secure and the union dues continue to roll in.



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