

Australia: Sydney city council locks out community theatre group

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Late last month, on January 29, the Sydney City Council (SCC) shut down the community-run Archway 1 Theatre Company and Arts Studio, which had been operating for several years under a heritage-listed light rail viaduct in the inner-western suburb of Annandale.

The theatre and studio were a not-for-profit, self-funded initiative run by actors, artists and other volunteers. As well as theatre performances, they hosted a range of activities, including visual arts and photography, musical performances as well as classes in drama, dance and other arts.

Without warning, SCC officers chained and padlocked the outside doors of the facility in the early hours of the morning, preventing those who were using it from gaining access to their equipment and other belongings.

The SCC's "independent" Mayor Clover Moore has been insisting upon the arts venue's closure throughout the past year, as part of the Council's "Johnstons Creek Parklands Master Plan." Under this proposal the viaduct archways are to be "opened up" to provide access to expanded parkland and a future skateboard construction.

The area adjoins a multi-million dollar private apartment and retail project, developed by the Mirvac real estate investment corporation at the former Harold Park harness racing track and tram depot. The disused tram depot is being given a \$34 million refit to accommodate restaurants, shops and other commercial operations.

The Johnstons Creek Plan is associated with various New South Wales government and SCC schemes to enhance property developer profits by converting former industrial sites and public housing estates into havens for the rich, as well as boosting tourist potential. As the state government's "Metropolitan Plan for

Sydney 2036" declares, the central aim is to promote "Sydney's image" and "strengthen its position as a global tourism destination."

In March 2014, the state Liberal government began privatising public sector homes and apartments in the historic inner-city areas, Millers Point and The Rocks, with the aim of forcing about 500 working-class residents out of their homes (see: "Australia: State government to sell off Sydney Harbour public housing"). A month earlier, SCC rangers, backed by state police, evicted about 20 homeless people sleeping under a Wentworth Park viaduct in Glebe, the same light-rail link that passes through Annandale.

Last month's closure of the Archway1 Theatre and Studio followed an eviction order in December, but a petition containing over 1,000 signatures and plans for a legal challenge forced then Deputy Mayor Robyn Kemmis to promise further negotiations in January. Scheduled talks with the council's CEO Monica Barone, however, did not occur. In fact, the lockdown was initiated in the aftermath of the sudden death of Kemmis in late December, and the appointment of Greens councillor Irene Doutney to the position.

Last year, Doutney and state Greens MP Jamie Parker publicly opposed the eviction. So far neither have made any official statement on the lockdown.

Last week, the council issued a statement claiming that the Archway Theatre and Studio facility had been closed because it posed "fire and safety concerns," and was being used as a private residence. These claims are false.

The building was not used for private accommodation and the arts group, which had paid rent to the council for the facility for several years, had suspended dramatic productions last September, pending resolution of the dispute with the council. A subsequent

fire inspection commissioned by Archway 1 Theatre in December revealed that the place was safe and the building compliant.

While the Archway 1 arts group receives no government funding, closure of the venue occurs amid ongoing cuts to arts funding by federal and state governments, Liberal and Labor alike. These cutbacks have particularly impacted on small performance companies, lesser known artists and non-mainstream creative work. According to a recent report, there is a severe shortage of small and affordable theatre venues in Sydney for independent drama, with at least nine theatres closing in the past decade.

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Archway 1 supporters and Annandale residents protested outside the locked theatre and studio facilities on January 30. The theatre's artistic director and founder **Rachel Jordan** told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the arts group had been "treated with contempt" by the entire council.

"They treated us like we were some kind of squatters or like a mosquito in the room—an irritation, an annoyance. I've lost any faith I had in the city council, the government and the political system. Everything we did to accommodate to the council's demands was ignored.

"The council and the government talk about development of the arts and cultural life, but they will only back projects that bolster their own prestige and political standing. There are all sorts of big events—the Sydney Festival, the Vivid festival, fireworks and other things—but these are designed to give the impression that there's a big arts industry and a vibrant cultural life.

"Millions of dollars are spent, but it's all about prestige and profitability. This is the paradigm that capitalism demands of art and culture today."

Stefan von Reiche, another Archway 1 founder, said: "This was a grass roots project that evolved organically. People donated furniture, lights and other equipment because they saw the benefit and supported it. There is no real room for a community theatre or artistic-cultural space as far as the council is concerned.

"We proposed all sorts of alternatives—similar to the glassed in arch-ways you see in places like London and Paris, and which are used for various cultural activities—but the council ignored all these suggestions.

"The lockdown says a lot about the council machinery and how it operates. There are no niceties, no warnings or notice, just an underhanded manoeuvre in the early hours of the morning to change the locks."

Frank, an Annandale resident, said: "On the one hand, the council claims to be all for community arts and involvement in artistic and cultural activity, but then they shut down places like this. If you're not a large corporation then you don't count. The little people are not considered.

"The Sydney City Council is only interested in big businesses which will bring in big money. They want to get onside with a couple of very powerful lobby groups."

Ruth, another resident, said, "We moved into this area two years ago and discovered the Archway Theatre. This sort of organisation is very important to the whole community. The problem today is that theatre and the arts are all about money, not about artistic creativity. If the developers and the council don't see any financial gain then they're not interested."



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