

Australian artists and industry professionals oppose funding cuts

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30 June 2016

Actors, writers, directors and other artists have been holding protests across Australia in the lead-up to this weekend's federal election to oppose escalating government funding cutbacks to arts institutions and grants to individual artists across all disciplines.

A National Day of Action was held on June 17, with demonstrations in several Australian cities. In Sydney, a protest was held outside Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's electoral office, while in central Melbourne, artists unfurled a large banner on the Nicholas Building, the home to several art studios, denouncing the cuts.

Some theatre companies are ending their performances with actors addressing audiences and explaining the destructive ramifications of reduced funding. Those visiting national- and state-funded galleries, contemporary art spaces, university galleries, commercial galleries and art schools are being urged to sign petitions opposing the Liberal-National Coalition government's arts cuts in its May 3 federal budget.

Over the past three years, the Coalition has slashed over \$300 million from the national arts budget, drastically impacting on a range of artistic disciplines and destroying hundreds of jobs. This includes over \$50 million in cuts to Screen Australia, which helps finance and assist Australian filmmakers.

These cuts are contributing to a terrible toll of job losses in the arts. During 2014–15 alone, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, about 16,000 jobs were lost across all artistic disciplines. This was a 7.4 percent decline in employment in the sector, leaving just 210,000 people.

Last year, the federal government imposed a \$105 million reduction to the Australia Council for the Arts, the government's nominally independent arts funding body. The money, which represented 16 percent of the

council's total funds, was diverted into a new so-called National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA), with grants determined at the discretion of the arts minister. There was no prior consultation with Australia Council officials, or other arts administrators, and no details released on how the "excellence" program would operate.

In December, because of a widespread outcry, the government suddenly shut down the NPEA and renamed it the Catalyst fund, declaring that it would provide money only to individual projects, and promised that NPEA funds would be returned to the Australia Council. Only \$32 million of the \$105 million came back to the Australia Council.

The full impact of the Australia Council cuts only became clear, however, last month when the agency announced this year's grants. The council slashed the number of arts bodies receiving funds by more than a third, to only 147, and stopped money to 65 organisations, which now face closure. As a result, an estimated 1,300 direct jobs are expected to be wiped out in the creative sector.

Some of the hardest-hit organisations were small-to-medium sized groups, including theatre and dance groups, galleries, experimental or interactive arts groups, small-run publishers and some music and arts festivals. Most of these depend heavily on volunteer labour.

Over half of the 41 visual arts organisations granted government funds since 2012, including the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA), were defunded. NAVA director Tamara Winikoff told the media that the cuts were "an attack on the independence and integrity of the arts and a denigration of its value."

Andrew Kay from Live Performance Australia, the

performing industry's peak body, told journalists the organisation expected 40 percent of small-to-medium companies would collapse. "That's 18 to 20 companies that won't be creating new productions, hundreds of creative and talented Australians out of work and lost revenue," he said.

Force Majeure, a Sydney dance company, was among those defunded. Its chairperson Jo Dyer said that many arts organisation "have gone from having stable, multi-year funding to having to apply for reduced, one-off, project-based funding in hyper-competitive rounds."

For their own electoral purposes, the Labor Party and the Greens have attempted to posture as "saviours of the arts," promising to reverse the cuts to the Australia Council and to boost cultural spending.

Labor's arts spokesmen Mark Dreyfus declared: "Labor is the party of the arts." He promised that Labor would shut down the Catalyst fund, return its funds to the Australia Council, and provide an additional \$161 million in "new arts investment" over four years. The Greens likewise pledged to restore the Australia Council cuts and invest \$270.2 million over four years to "grow the arts in Australia."

Even these totally inadequate pledges are worthless. They would be thrown aside if Labor, or the Greens in coalition with Labor, came to office on July 2. Contrary to their posturing, these parties defend market-driven outcomes, which increasingly subordinate the arts to the commercial interests of the financial elite, and the corporate profit system itself.

The historical record proves, moreover, that there have been no essential differences between the major parties' arts policies in the past four decades.

In 1987, the Hawke Labor government introduced an "efficiency dividend" to impose annual funding cuts on all sections of federal public sector, including those at national galleries, museums, libraries, the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) and other cultural institutions. Ever since then, successive governments, including the Greens-backed Labor minority government of 2010 to 2013, have either maintained or intensified these "dividends," eliminating thousands of public sector jobs.

The "efficiency dividends" have crippled these arts-related bodies, preventing them from carrying out vital work. This includes the ongoing procurement of important art and cultural pieces, but also establishing

and managing exhibitions and carrying out vital restoration work and digital archiving. NFSA workers have warned that hundreds of valuable films, photographs and audio files are deteriorating and will be lost if they are not digitalised and preserved.

While Labor and the Greens claim to oppose the Coalition government's cuts to the arts, they have raised no objections to billions of dollars being made available for the military for the acquisition of submarines, warships and war planes, in line with the US "pivot" to Asia and the associated preparations for war against China.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party insisting that access to culture and the arts is a basic social right for all, and not just the wealthy few. Music, theatre, art, film, libraries, museums, galleries and cultural and historical exhibitions are essential to human civilisation, the uplifting of human understanding and the development of artistic, social and political consciousness.

Instead of being gutted, funding for the arts should be vastly expanded, and decently-paid secure employment should be available for all those engaged in creative work. As the SEP explains in its election statement, these and other essential social rights cannot be achieved without a vast redistribution of wealth and the ending of the domination of the financial and corporate oligarchy over economic and social life. This fight can be taken forward only as part of the struggle of the working class internationally, based on a socialist program.

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our web site or Facebook page.

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