

# UK: Tate workers asked to “put money towards a sailing boat” for museum director

Jean Shaoul  
15 May 2017

A notice recently went up in the staff rooms of the Tate Modern and Tate Britain asking employees to “put money towards a sailing boat” as a “surprise gift” for director Sir Nicholas Serota, who is leaving after 28 years, sparking anger and derision.

It is symptomatic of the growing commercialisation of the arts and insensitivity to the overwhelming majority of workers on poverty wages on the part of the handful of arts “administrators” who have profited from it.

Serota, who was paid around £200,000, including bonuses, in the year ending March 2016, heads a 3,100 workforce in four galleries—Tate Modern, Tate Britain, Tate St Ives, Cornwall and Tate Liverpool. Apart from 26 people (up from 17 in 2008) paid more than £60,000, the Tate’s workforce earns on average £24,000, significantly less than the national median of £27,600. For the majority of the Tate’s employees who live in London, one of the most expensive cities in the world, this means poverty wages.

Economic hardship is matched by insecure conditions of employment. Many, including those who staff information points, cloakrooms, cafes and retail outlets, answer visitor questions, show visitors around and provide security services, are employed by facilities management companies. A year ago, Serota oversaw the outsourcing of jobs to Securitas, which then tore up union agreements and imposed zero-hours contracts, paying the so-called London living wage, £9.75 an hour. This equates to less than £20,000 for a 40-hour week for 50 weeks (there is no holiday pay). Some work for agencies that pay even less.

Low pay and outsourcing, which has resulted in lower pay than for Tate employees doing the same work, are the subject of on-going discussions between the unions and the gallery. Furthermore, the request to

stump up cash for Serota comes just one week after the Tate took away workers’ 10 percent discount at the canteen.

One Securitas employee told the *Guardian* on condition of anonymity that there was “disgust” among colleagues when they saw the request for donations. “There was a mixture of shock and laughter,” he said. “For us, Serota’s legacy among staff is one of privatisation and union busting and turning the Tate into Westfield with pictures.”

When the scale of workers’ outrage became clear, Tate management took down the notice. The Tate issued a statement saying that all staff had been invited to Serota’s leaving party and that there was “no obligation for any staff to give towards a leaving gift. However, they can if they wish.” It added, “Tate has invested considerably in raising salaries over the past three years,” a reference to the fact that the gallery had agreed in 2014 to pay the London Living Wage. Conscious of the reputational damage to their image, management and Securitas called on staff to discuss their “concerns” with them, not the media.

Workers at Tate Modern told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Serota himself sent a personal email to all staff saying he was not expecting a present. Many were reluctant to speak about it, fearing retribution.

One worker at Tate Modern, a fine arts graduate, explained that she thought it was funny. “How can you ask people on low wages who can’t afford to pay the rent to contribute to the cost of a boat?” She explained that she had been working for the Tate Modern for two and a half years, and was now on a zero-hours contract with Securitas, saying, “Zero-hours works for me because I am living at home. But it doesn’t work for everyone.” “But it is not even as though we know him,” she added.

Tate Modern, one of the world's most popular galleries of modern and contemporary art, is the fifth most visited gallery in the country with 4.7 million visitors annually. But visitor numbers have dropped to their lowest for 10 years, with a corresponding fall in income, compared to the record-breaking year in 2014 with 5.8 million visitors, due to the success of the Henri Matisse—The Cut-Outs exhibition.

While entrance to museums and galleries has been free since 2001, most rely on special exhibitions with paid entry and commercial activities to boost income. Public funding for the arts, never generous, has fallen since the global financial crisis. Funding for England's national museums has been cut by around 30 percent in real terms since 2012, with similar cuts in the block grants for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

But 94 percent of museums in the UK do not receive government or Arts Council funding and are dependent in whole or in part on locally sourced grants. The plans outlined in the November 2015 spending review will slash the local government grant by more than half from 2015-16 to 2019-20, after 14 percent cuts since 2010, jeopardising the survival of many local authority museums, which are nonstatutory services, and many independent museums.

Forty-four local-authority-funded museums in the UK have closed since 2010, and further casualties seem inevitable. While Lancashire is reportedly the most badly affected, Birmingham City Council has announced a third round of funding cuts to arts and culture since 2010, reducing its annual spend from £6.4 million to £4.8 million as of March 2016, including funding to the recently opened Birmingham City Library, now open just six hours a day.

According to the Museums Association's survey of cuts in 2015, nearly one in five regional museums closed a part or branch of their museum to the public in the previous year, or planned such a closure in 2016. One in 10 expects to introduce entrance charges to cover reductions in local authority funding and/or sell some of their assets. Many museums reported staff cuts, with a quarter cutting their full-time staff, and nearly half increasing the number of "volunteers," compared with 32 percent the previous year.

The overwhelming majority of public funding for museums goes to those in London, in part at least as a subvention to the hospitality industry, to which

museums and galleries contribute £1.45 billion. The combined Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Arts Council of England spending amounts to £68.99 per head of population in London and £4.58 in the rest of England.

Tate, while more generously funded than many of Britain's museums, has not been exempt from the cuts, with its public funding down from £31.7 million in 2008 to £28.7 million last year. Always dependent on low waged staff, and able to rely on its cache to attract art graduates as interns, it has cut its costs by outsourcing and boosting income from donations and commercial activities. Last year, its trading operations brought in £55 million, up by around 67 percent since 2004. Nevertheless, this was less than in the previous year when visitor numbers were boosted by the Matisse exhibition. The prime consideration now is hosting "block-buster" exhibitions with hefty admission fees and expensive merchandise to meet revenue targets.

Last year, Tate Modern opened the £260 million Switch House, a massive new building, largely empty of art, next to the original Tate Modern building. It has since been renamed the Blavatnik Building after USSR-born billionaire Len Blavatnik donated more than £50 million to the museum. Pledged in 2011, the money was accepted by the Tate's board of trustees this month and is the largest-ever financial donation to a UK museum. Blavatnik, who made his fortune by seizing former state assets after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, is worth £15.982 billion. He is Britain's second richest individual, according to this year's *Sunday Times* Rich List.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**