

Australia: Coronavirus cancellations decimate live performance industry

Martin Scott
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As the coronavirus pandemic continues to spread, the Australian government has introduced a growing number of restrictions on “non-essential” gatherings, resulting in a wave of cancellations of festivals, theatrical productions, concerts, art exhibitions and other cultural events.

Major festivals including Bluesfest Byron Bay, Vivid Sydney, the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, Dark Mofo and the National Folk Festival have been called off, along with thousands of other events.

The Australian *ilostmygig* site, which invites entertainers, crew and other workers in the industry to submit details of work cancelled as a result of COVID-19, recorded more than \$250 million in lost income, less than a week after being established. This represents only a small fraction of the financial devastation that will be experienced by workers in the sector as cancellations continue to roll in.

The uncertainty caused by constant changes to venue capacity restrictions has compounded the problem. The initial limit, imposed on March 16, prohibited crowds of more than 500. Two days later, this was reduced to 100. On March 20, the limit was further reduced, allowing only one patron for every four square metres of floor space. As a result, small local music venues that have stayed open have had to make constant adjustments to band line-ups and staffing arrangements.

The total lockdown of non-essential activities announced by the New South Wales and Victorian state governments on Sunday means that any remaining venues in at least those two states have now been forced to close.

Social distancing and quarantine measures are clearly necessary to slow the progress of the pandemic and to save lives. State and federal governments, however, have repeatedly undermined and blocked measures

demanding by medical experts to halt the spread of coronavirus. They have, moreover, made clear that it is working people in every industry who will bear the brunt of the massive economic slump enveloping the Australian and world economy.

Already, decades of cuts to federal arts funding, punitive lockdown laws in Sydney, police strip searches—including of children—at music festivals, and arcane licensing regulations on live music have left the performance industry in Australia hanging by a thread. Stagnant wages, declining working conditions, and cost of living increases have left many ordinary people with little time or money to attend cultural events.

Despite these pressures, the arts contribute \$112 billion to the Australian economy and employ more than 600,000 people. Many of these are musicians, dancers, actors, stage crew, roadies, hospitality workers and others whose earnings depend on live performances.

The “stage one” restrictions to “non-essential services” announced by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Sunday night apply to bars, restaurants, cafes, places of worship, cinemas and other indoor entertainment venues.

Many businesses, including major shopping centres and department stores, will operate as normal, in a transparent attempt by the government to shore up corporate profits. This means the coronavirus will continue to spread throughout Australian cities.

Undermining the rationale for the closure of the entertainment industry, Morrison has continued to insist that schools remain open. The Victorian state Labor government yesterday brought forward a scheduled holiday, meaning that pupils will remain at home. Teachers, however, have been forced to continue to go to work this week.

The New South Wales government has announced that schools will remain open but has recommended that parents keep their children home. The Queensland Labor government has blithely declared that schools will continue to operate as per normal, despite a major spike in coronavirus infections in the state and warnings from the state's chief medical officer that the measure is placing older teachers at risk.

The decisions have been made despite the significant public health risk to teachers and the broader danger posed by millions of children spending hours in close contact with their schoolmates and travelling on overcrowded public transport.

Governments are seeking to prevent any disruption to business operations and to avoid putting in place the childcare arrangements that would be required for the children of essential service workers in the event of a complete school shutdown.

A substantial number of musicians supplement their performance income with tutoring. Many schools have already cancelled band rehearsals and one-on-one music lessons as a precautionary measure. As the possibility of school closures increases, efforts are being made to move to online lessons, but the abysmal standard of internet bandwidth in Australia will mean this is not viable for a significant proportion of students and tutors.

In stark contrast to the federal government's immediate \$715 million handout to the major airlines, any prospect of financial support for entertainment workers has been mired in a series of roundtable discussions.

The government's initial \$17.6 billion stimulus package was primarily aimed at propping up big business and offers nothing at all for sole traders—the majority of entertainers.

Amid mounting anger, and as the prospect of mass unemployment was brought into stark focus, the federal government announced on Sunday that sole traders who are out of work will be able to receive welfare payments and an additional income supplement, along with other affected workers.

Under the measure, all welfare recipients will receive an additional \$550 per fortnight, but only for six months. The “expanded access” will not begin until April 27, more than six weeks after the cancellations began. Workers will be forced to rely on savings, credit

cards or short-term loans in the interim. This delay will sharply impact musicians and staff at smaller bars and restaurants, who are often paid cash-in-hand at the end of a night's work.

Even once the payments begin, they will be insufficient to cover most workers' living expenses, as they amount to only two-thirds of median income or less. The maximum payment, including rent assistance, for a single person without dependent children is \$1255.30 per fortnight. Average house and apartment rental rates in Sydney are between \$530 and \$560 per week.

Sunday's announcement did not include any measures aimed at ensuring that businesses in the arts and entertainment sector, or any other industry, retain their full- and part-time employees. Thousands of venues will not be able to meet their overhead costs as months pass without revenue, meaning those artists that survive the COVID-19 furlough will return to an industry with far fewer performance opportunities.



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