# Australian arts and entertainment workers devastated by coronavirus pandemic

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Throughout the world, the arts and entertainment sectors have been decimated by the coronavirus pandemic. The dangerous and highly infectious virus has accelerated a decades-long assault on funding for creative and cultural endeavours at the hands of cost-cutting governments and brought into focus the perilous social conditions facing the overwhelming majority of artists and entertainers.

Under conditions where there was no vaccine, lockdowns and restrictions on public gatherings were necessary basic responses to the dangerous and highly-contagious disease. Trillions of dollars internationally have been handed over to big business but little or no compensation made available to the tens of thousands of individuals whose livelihoods depend on live audiences. Artists have been forced to live off their often meagre savings or poverty-level welfare payments.

While Australia has so far avoided the massive COVID-19 death tolls and infection rates seen overseas, the country's live performance industry has not escaped the devastating economic consequences of the pandemic.

Along with tourism and hospitality workers, entertainment workers were among the first to lose work as the result of lockdowns, struggle to receive government assistance, and are still many months, if not years, away from a return to pre-COVID-19 levels of employment.

In mid-March, the closure of bars, restaurants and other venues meant the overnight cancellation of virtually all work for the hundreds of thousands employed in the arts and entertainment sector. By the end of April, more than $340 million in lost work had been reported to the *ilostmygig* website.

A report last month by consulting firm EY found that 79,000 jobs—two thirds of the workforce—had been lost in the live entertainment industry since October 2019, and the economic output had decreased by $23.6 billion (65 percent). The report also noted that, "for commercial live entertainment operators both large and small, revenue in September/October remains at no more than 10 percent of 2019 levels."

Between February and August, hours worked in the "Arts and Recreation Services" fell by more than 25 percent, the largest decline in any Australian sector, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Opera Australia recently announced the forced redundancy of almost one third of its 56 full-time orchestral players, before advertising most of the "redundant" positions as temporary roles. This brazen move towards increased casualisation is typical of restructuring being carried out in numerous industries, ostensibly because of COVID-19.

These job cuts at Australia's biggest arts employer are the product of decades of funding cuts to the country's cultural institutions and the insistence that they must be run as profitable businesses rather than for the good of society. Only one fifth of Opera Australia's revenue comes from government funding; the majority comes from ticket sales, meaning the pandemic has had a major impact. Yet the company was prevented from receiving emergency funding unless it first sold off its headquarters and warehouse in Sydney.

The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra stood down all its musicians and one third of administrative staff without warning in April, leaving them with only the $1,500 per fortnight JobKeeper payment.

In May, the 100 musicians and administrative staff of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (SSO) were forced to accept pay cuts of up to 30 percent at least until the end of the year. Musicians in the Adelaide Symphony

Orchestra took a 20 percent pay cut, despite continuing to perform for live streams and video recordings.

The response of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the union representing musicians, to these attacks has been to praise the SSO deal and propose alternative cost-cutting plans along similar lines to the management of other orchestras.

The union has also agreed to new contract clauses for screen productions allowing cast and crew to be immediately stood down without pay if shooting is halted due to the coronavirus.

While government bailouts for big business were announced within days of lockdowns being announced, the $1,500 per fortnight JobKeeper payment only began being paid to sole traders (which includes most performing artists) in early May, after more than six weeks with no work.

Around one-third of Australia’s 40,000 creative and performing arts workers were not able to receive JobKeeper payments at all.

Actors, dancers, musicians, and crew working in theatrical productions are usually employed by a number of different companies each year, meaning they did not qualify for the wage subsidy. Many of the 42 percent of arts and recreation workers employed as casuals were also ineligible for the payment, as they had not worked for the same employer for 12 months.

Despite widespread calls for broader access to the wage subsidy, the JobKeeper extension, which began in October, posed additional eligibility challenges with the introduction of a tiered payment system meaning workers unable to prove they worked more than 80 hours in February will receive only $750 per fortnight before tax. For artists, who typically devote significantly more time to unpaid preparation than they spend on stage, this presented a major challenge.

A $250 million support package for the arts was announced by the federal government in June, but so far nothing has been delivered. Arts Minister Paul Fletcher claimed in a television appearance on October 11 that “much of that money or some of that money [is] already flowing.” The following week, however, Simon Atkinson, secretary of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications—“Arts” having been subsumed into the mega-department in 2019—admitted that “in a cash flow sense—no cash has flowed.”

Little of the promised $250 million is likely to end up in the hands of artists or industry workers in any case. The first component of the package to roll out is the $50 million Screen Australia temporary interruption fund, which provides additional insurance cover—for a fee—for film and television productions that have not been able to commence filming because insurance companies refuse to accept liability in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak on set.

The first recipients of funding from the Restart Investment to Sustain and Expand (RISE) grant program were announced last month, almost six months after the package was unveiled. Only 80 percent of the promised $75 million will be awarded in the first round, with the remainder deferred until mid-2021.

The rest of the package comprises $90 million in government-backed loans for new productions, and $35 million for Commonwealth-funded arts organisations on the brink of insolvency.

These sums are woefully inadequate and will do little to save an industry that employs 600,000 people and contributes more than $110 billion to the national economy each year.

Even if Australia continues to avoid the worst of the virus and a successful vaccine can be widely distributed in the coming months, the economic impact of the pandemic will not disappear overnight. The arts and entertainment sector, heavily dependent on the disposable income of its audience, will suffer for years as working people continues to face mass unemployment and cuts to wages and conditions.

The poor state of government arts funding is nothing new, but the coronavirus pandemic has sharply exposed the problems of forcing cultural institutions to operate as profit-making businesses. The insistence that these organisations rely on ticket sales not only hurts performers and technical crew, but also stifles the intellectual development of workers by denying them access to the arts.