

The “loss to the nation’s artistic and creative output may prove incalculable”

New reports show extent of pandemic’s devastation of the arts in New York City, California and nationwide

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A number of reports released since the beginning of 2021 provide further insight into the unprecedented impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had—and is continuing to have—on the sphere of arts and culture in the US, which accounts for millions of arts workers and artists making up 3.4 percent of the total national work force.

A report by the New York State Comptroller’s office, released February 24, on the effects of COVID-19 on the New York City arts, entertainment and recreation sector, which employed 128,400 workers in 2019, found that employment fell by 66 percent in 2020. However, as the study itself points out, given that this figure does not take into account nearly 31,000 self-employed workers and freelancers, often the first to lose work, the jobless rate is undoubtedly higher.

This decline, the largest suffered by any sector in the city, more than wipes out the 42 percent growth of this field over the course of the decade from 2009 to 2019. The Comptroller’s report also cites an estimate by Womply, a software services company that tracks credit card transactions, that a staggering 59 percent of arts and entertainment businesses in New York City have closed in the past year, second only to the number of bars that have shut their doors.

The fifteenth annual report by Otis College of Art and Design on California’s “Creative Economy”—which includes fine and performing arts, fashion, entertainment and digital media, creative goods and architecture—discloses that 175,360 jobs were lost in 2020. The February 25 report begins by mentioning the record

growth (16 percent) of California’s Creative Economy between 2008 and 2019, which added 146,000 jobs during this period. But as in New York City, the massive loss of arts jobs in the last year is greater than the cumulative “record growth” over the previous 10 years.

The report points to Creative Economy job cuts having “a massive ripple effect on supply chains and household spending,” and calculates an estimated 337,000 jobs have been lost through secondary impacts. In total, the number of both direct and secondary job losses from “damage to the Creative Economy,” argues the report, stands at over half a million in California.

Significantly, the Otis report argues that “the entire creative ecosystem” is existentially asking, “Will the new normal include them?,” while also indicating that many artists and arts workers “doubted whether the old normal included them, given the challenges they faced during the longest economic expansion in US history.”

Referring to the wholly inadequate aid given to the creative sector, the Otis report also observes, “The past year has illustrated painfully how the public and private support systems intended to protect and support individuals in the Creative Economy have either frayed or broken altogether.”

An ongoing series of national studies (updated March 1) by arts nonprofit “Americans for the Arts,” on the COVID-19-related impact on the arts, surveyed 33,000 artists and creative workers and 19,000 arts organizations.

Of the artists and workers surveyed, 63 percent have become fully unemployed by the pandemic and 95 percent report a loss of creativity-based income,

averaging \$21,800 over the past year. Some 67 percent are unable to access the resources for creative work, while 78 percent have no post-pandemic financial recovery plan, and their top needs are unemployment insurance, food and housing assistance and loan forgiveness.

Of the nonprofit arts and cultural organizations surveyed, 59 percent remain closed, while 11 percent are not confident they will survive the pandemic. Financial losses for these organizations are estimated at more than \$15 billion, and 898,000 jobs are no longer being supported.

A National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) report made public in January emphasizes the severe situation facing performing artists, in particular.

After listing disturbing unemployment figures for actors (52 percent), dancers (55 percent) and musicians (27 percent) at the end of 2020, the NEA survey continues, “Long before COVID-19, independent artists and musicians often struggled to secure long-term or consistent income, epitomizing the ‘gig economy’ and sometimes personifying the ‘starving artist’ axiom. The chronic lack of access to affordable, employer-subsidized healthcare for freelance or ‘gig’ artists has created an even greater vulnerability and financial burden during the pandemic.” This is the wretched reality in the “world’s richest country,” bastion of “free enterprise.”

The NEA report continues, “Finally, the restaurant and hospitality industry—a regular source of second or third jobs—has also been disproportionately affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19, further exacerbating near- and long-term prospects for recovery.”

Also commenting on the major shortcomings of arts assistance programs at the federal, state and local levels, the NEA writes, “These emergent means of support are by no means adequate to offset projected losses for the arts and cultural sector. The amount of relief awarded, to date, is disproportionately small when compared with the sector’s economic footprint.”

In line with other reports, the NEA study warns of more jobs beings lost in the near future, along with permanent closures of arts organizations if the current trends continue, concluding that “the commensurate loss to the nation’s artistic and creative output may prove incalculable.”

This crisis, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic that began almost exactly one year ago, is beginning to generate protests by artists and arts workers against the serious lack of support they have received.

Artists rallied outside Democratic Governor Andrew

Cuomo’s office in New York City last week, calling for a modern-day Works Progress Administration (WPA)—Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program, which aided artists during the Great Depression. The rally was organized by the Music Workers Alliance, which estimates that 71 percent of musicians and DJs in New York City have lost three-quarters or more of their income, 33 percent have depleted their savings, 33 percent are looking for new jobs in other fields and 15 percent have had to move to save money.

Cuomo’s preferred approach to the crisis, needless to say, does not include full and direct funding for desperate artists and arts organizations, but rather pushing for a swift reopening of the arts and entertainment sector, at whatever the cost. At a press conference last month, New York’s governor arrogantly asserted, “There are venues that we want to start to reopen with testing and capacity limitations. Theaters, arenas, why can’t you do it with Broadway? You can.”

Both the New York City and California studies also point to reopenings as the principal cure for the arts devastation. “The Fine Arts and Performing Arts sector must begin preparing for reopening,” states the Otis report, for example.

This policy—of prematurely relaunching cultural events with live audiences gathered indoors, which threatens the further spreading of sickness and death from COVID-19, in order to “save” artists, arts workers and arts organizations from ruin—flows from acceptance of the profit system and the financial interests of the capitalist class, not the well-being of art and culture and those that take part in their creation.

The massive sums accumulated by Wall Street swindlers and the corporate oligarchs should be used to provide income for workers, artists and arts organizations as long as the pandemic persists. No one should be forced to choose between going hungry or giving up one’s profession, on the one hand, and death from COVID-19, on the other.

The only way forward toward a society that prioritizes social and cultural needs is through the mobilization of the working class on a socialist basis.



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