

Occupation of French theatres highlights devastation of the cultural sector during the pandemic

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Since March 4, Paris's Odéon Theatre has been occupied by protesters demanding increased support for the cultural sector and a reopening of cultural venues. Currently, at least 60 venues across France are being occupied by protesters comprising mostly students and cultural workers. This follows a wave of similar protests in December, including an appeal to the high court that was rejected.

A number of speeches at the 46th Césars, held on March 12, expressed solidarity with protesters. Most prominently, actress Corinne Masiero stripped naked at the film and television award ceremony, revealing demands for increased financial support for cultural workers during the pandemic written across her body.

The protests take place in the context of an uncontrolled and accelerating spread of the virus in France. The announcement of inadequate lockdown measures in Paris at the end of last week will not halt the rapid spread of the virus driven by deadly new variants. The seven-day average for daily cases has exceeded 30,000 for the first time since mid-November. Total COVID-19 deaths exceed 90,000.

The impact of the pandemic on the French cultural sector has been catastrophic. According to *screendaily.com*, last year French live performing artists' revenue dropped 72 percent or €4.2 billion, and the television and film industry experienced a 20 percent drop, equivalent to €4.8 billion. Many independent artists, freelance film workers, and workers at cultural institutions have seen their income reduced to zero over the past 12 months. At the same time, Europe's richest man, Bernard Arnault, saw his fortune more than double to €135 billion since March 2020.

The government's only response has been to waive the threshold for the number of hours worked before an artist can qualify for miserly state support. Hagop Demirdjian, a jazz musician, told *France24* that the government's response was "the absolute minimum: [it] stopped artists of dying of hunger." Despite the pandemic, government plans to implement further cuts to the social support system in July

2021 remain in place.

A €7.5 billion bailout was handed to businesses in the cultural sector in 2020. However, as has been the case with bailouts in all major industries, only a tiny fraction has been received by workers, with the vast majority lining the pockets of owners and executives of large companies.

While many cultural workers' concern is their living conditions throughout the pandemic, the unions and media are driving a campaign to channel this anger behind deadly calls for a reopening. The CGT Spectacle union demanded a meeting with the minister of culture, Roselyne Bachelot, to determine "the issues of the profession and the conditions that will allow us to return to work." The occupations began one day after the French Directors Association penned an open letter, titled "President Macron: Reopen cinemas now!" on March 3.

The media has presented the protests as singularly concerned with loosening lockdown measures. *France24* ran the headline, "Protesters occupy Paris theatres to protest against COVID-19 shutdowns." *Le Monde* wrote, "several hundred people [gathered] from the Place de la Republic to demand the reopening of cultural venues." *Le Figaro* stated that protesters came to demand "the reopening of cultural venues." In fact, the interviews featured in the articles with protesters focus on the financial crisis facing workers.

Demand for reopenings is however in line with the Macron government's deadly herd immunity policy, which was only extended with the implementation of another pseudo-lockdown that will not stem the spread of the virus. Minister of Culture Bachelot met with protesters in the Odéon theatre on March 6 and pledged to "continue discussions."

In contrast, "yellow vest" protests and demonstrations against the build-up of police state laws are met with tear gas, rubber bullets, mass arrests and riot police assaults.

While there is undoubtedly confusion and even desperation amongst cultural workers facing poverty and unemployment during the pandemic, legitimate demands for

full income and access to cultural life during the pandemic must not be subordinated to deadly calls for a reopening. The latter demand reflects the narrow interests of an upper-middle class layer, including in the cultural and media industry and union officials, whose wealth is tied to profits in the sector.

This interest is laid bare in the Directors Association's open letter, published in *Le Monde*. It was signed by more than 800 figures in the film industry, some of them well-known actors and directors.

The letter complains, "Today, and for many long months, the 5,913 screens of France's 2,046 cinemas have been kept closed in the name of a health precautionary principle." Indicating the lack of public support for reopening demands, they note, "we would like to clarify something that public opinion does not know...the nightmare that the film industry and its workers are living through."

The letter cites a German coronavirus study to claim that "cinemas are twice as safe as supermarkets and three times safer than train travel," and that cinemas should therefore reopen. Yet even if one accepts the findings of the study—which does not control for air circulation in cultural venues, and lumps together cinemas, museums and theatres into one category—the conclusion to be drawn from such data would not be for the reopening of cinemas. It points to the danger posed by full supermarkets and public transport to the spread of the virus.

The Macron government is opposed to the closure of non-essential workplaces and schools, which contribute to packed public transportation, because such measures would impact the profits of major French corporations.

The authors conclude: "Each week of closure adds to the disaster in progress. It is the future of a profession that is mortgaged, as finished films pile up on distributors' shelves every week." To the extent that this is tied to a demand for a reopening of cultural centres, this means that the pandemic cannot be allowed to impact the careers, awards, and incomes of a wealthy layer in the film industry, and the profits of massive media conglomerations from large-scale theatrical releases.

This has nothing to do with the physical or cultural welfare of the 340,000 film-industry workers or 250,000 uncontracted performers and artists in the country. Moreover, the reopening of cultural venues would lead to an increase in COVID-19 deaths, and to a further delay in the period until the virus is controlled so cultural venues can be safely opened. The poorest members of society would make up the majority of the victims.

The demand for the reopening of cinemas is also absurd from any economic perspective other than the short-term profit motives of the large production and distribution

companies. It would not be sufficient to save independent cinemas, theatres, or museums from ruin, and would not lead to a significant increase in the income of small and independent artists. In June, when the pandemic was at its lowest point, many cultural venues performed to less than half-capacity, operating at a loss throughout the period. Now that the virus is much more widespread, attendance would be even lower.

Opposition to the irresponsible reopening campaign does not imply any indifference to the decimation of the arts and cultural sector, resulting from decades of funding cuts and exacerbated by the pandemic. Access to art and culture is a basic social right of the working class in France and internationally. It cannot be subordinated to the profit interests of giant media and distribution conglomerates and their shareholders.

A socially progressive response to the crisis in the arts would include the demand for massive investment in the cultural sector, for the free distribution of films and other online cultural exhibitions that can be displayed under conditions of social isolation, and massive support for artists, so that they can continue to produce when the pandemic has been stopped.

This must be implemented as part of a lockdown policy, involving the provision of a living wage to everyone, the closure of schools and non-essential workplaces, so that the population can shelter at home until the vaccines can be distributed. The resources exist for such policies, but they are monopolised by a corporate and financial oligarchy.

The defence of art and culture is indissolubly connected to the development of a new revolutionary movement in the working class internationally in defence of all social rights, for social equality and socialism. Serious artists should consciously oppose the campaign for a reopening and orient themselves toward this progressive international social force.



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