

COVID-19 pandemic triggers social, economic devastation among Canada's cultural workers

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The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the precarious state of Canada's cultural workers, and the contempt of the ruling elite for artists and the arts.

Workers in Canada's arts and culture sector were some of the country's most vulnerable, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, 450,000 workers laboured to produce music, live theatre, film, television, dance, radio and the visual arts, in many instances for poverty wages and with zero job security. Their average annual income was \$32,400 [US\$25,776]. The "gig economy" model itself originated to a considerable extent in the performing arts.

The pandemic and the refusal of governments at all levels to provide adequate support to the cultural sector have led to the destruction of at least 25 percent of these jobs, according to the Canadian Association for the Performing Arts. Those who remain "employed" are dramatically underemployed, with hours worked in the arts and related industries having plunged by 48.8 percent compared to 2019. These shocking figures in fact understate the crisis, since statistical surveys consider people to be "employed" if they have worked one hour in a month.

A survey of the performing arts conducted by Hill Strategies found that 83 percent of workers reported their income had been "severely reduced" by the pandemic. Forty percent reported being "very stressed," while 32 percent said they were "extremely stressed, to the point of losing sleep." The survey found that respondents had lost an average of \$25,000 of income per year, or 83 percent of average arts income in 2019.

In 2019, arts and culture produced 2.7 percent of Canada's GDP, or \$58 billion, which equates to \$121,848 for each cultural worker. But this contribution fell by 46 percent from September 2019 to September 2020. As a whole, the Canadian economy declined by 3.9 percent during the same period. Canadian artists are experiencing an unprecedented catastrophe as a result.

Before the pandemic, 1.8 percent of the Canadian labour

force was employed in the arts. While a small segment of workers, the contribution of these workers to the cultural life in Canada and internationally is immense.

Canadian artists produce music in all genres, from rock and pop to classical; they create drama, film, television and visual arts, which enrich cultural life around the world. Popular programs, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Umbrella Academy*, *The Expanse* and many others, are produced in Canada. Original Canadian stories such as *Kim's Convenience* and *Alias Grace* have found global audiences on streaming services such as Netflix. Musical artists, such as Chantal Kraviazuk, Avril Lavigne, Justin Bieber, Drake and The Weeknd, any criticisms of their work notwithstanding, are appreciated around the world. In a real sense, the state of Canadian cultural workers is an international issue.

The same can be said of artists in every country, to a greater or lesser extent. Art is a *social* practice. Our culture is a *world culture*. But despite their essential role in human life and happiness, cultural workers are often among the lowest paid and most precariously employed. They are brutally exploited by giant corporations, who treat the arts as a source of surplus value and shareholder payouts, not cultural enlightenment and spiritual satisfaction.

Since COVID-19 restrictions shut down most arts institutions, live performances, theatres and film production, many Canadian cultural workers have survived on the federal government's Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB—now renamed the Canada Emergency Benefit) of \$500 per week, which will expire on September 27, 2021. This meagre and totally inadequate support has not stopped many cultural workers facing impoverishment or fierce competition for low-wage jobs in other sectors.

Artists who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that regular CERB payments exposed the precarious nature of their previous employment. Brooke, a Gemini Award-winning actress and sculptor, commented, "The income

from the CERB has been extraordinary. I'm a senior artist, a very experienced film and theatre creator. It revealed how ridiculous the situation is. Three years ago I had a 'great income' somewhere south of \$40K. Then the next year I had \$11K. To go up and down like that makes it very difficult ... anxiety-wise ... rent-wise. Your life is fluctuating so wildly. I've lived at the poverty level for many years, and I'm an award-winning artist."

Claire, the administrator of a respected local theatre, said, "I had so many artists, a section of performing artists and their friends, who absolutely needed CERB. To many who rely on an unsteady income, CERB was actually better."

Annette, a full-time fine artist, offered a similar sentiment, remarking, "CERB saved me. Anybody that knocks that in any way makes me so mad. It was a big eye-opener."

From the very beginning, the federal Liberal government reminded workers that they could face fines and jail time for breaking the many rules associated with CERB. In the summer of 2020, 400,000 workers received warning letters from the Canada Revenue Agency that their benefits would need to be repaid in full. This was only rescinded in February after it became clear that such repayments were practically impossible and would generate mass social opposition.

Unlike the \$2,000 monthly pittance offered to workers in Canada's arts and cultural sector—barely the cost to rent a one-bedroom flat in Toronto—the country's banks and corporations received more than \$650 billion in pandemic relief. This massive bailout came without conditions. The Canadian government deferred the taxes of corporations reaping billions of dollars in profits and assumed \$150 billion in mortgage debt from the major banks.

At the same time, the government refused to force these banks to reduce outrageous credit card interest rates, typically 19 percent or higher. Many workers were forced to put basic expenses on these credit cards when their income ran out.

In contrast with the hundreds of billions it was able to pull out of its back pocket for banks and profitable corporations virtually overnight in March 2020, the Trudeau government took an entire year to find a miserable \$181 million to alleviate the situation in the performing arts sector. Competition for these totally inadequate grant funds will be fierce.

Claire told us, "We have been writing grants, looking for help, via the Ontario Arts Council and Department of Canadian Heritage. There is emergency funding through the Ontario Arts Council and Canadian Heritage. Grants are out for live-streaming equipment. But that cannot replace live theatre or the energy in a live performance. That is the heart of the performing arts. I'm glad that live streaming can

happen, but that just cannot compare to the collective euphoria of an audience of strangers sitting together and experiencing a work of beauty, together."

Much of the actual funds for live-streaming equipment will find their way into the coffers of technology corporations, not artists.

The meagre funds the Trudeau government has allotted will not be distributed equally to cultural workers but rather in a highly unequal manner, along unofficial networks of patronage that have been built up over years by the system of official arts funding in Canada, the provinces and territories. Most cultural workers will receive not a single cent. These programs will not remove artists from the pressures of the capitalist market but form an intrinsic component of intensified market discipline.

The psychological stress of isolation and an uncertain future, which is the direct product of the ruling elite's complete indifference to the plight of the arts, is taking its toll on artists. Brooke relates, "One of the things you lose when you're not working in the theatre is that it's a collective process. It's a social process. Actors work together, and it's the dynamic that comes out of that which creates the energy of the piece, and not having that ... you lose a part of yourself. The loneliness is a big problem."

The mental health crisis faced by all workers is unprecedented. As the artists who talked to the WSWS emphasized, the arts themselves are a major contributor to the spiritual and mental uplift of the whole of society in times of crisis. Claire noted, "Where did people go for comfort and sustenance, in terms of mental health? They went to the arts. Music, Netflix, movies, film."

But who will provide spiritual "comfort and sustenance" for workers in tomorrow's crisis, if half of today's cultural workers are driven into destitution? Never mind that Canadian imperialism is working overtime to ensure that "tomorrow's crisis" is a catastrophic war with Russia and China which could easily destroy world civilization itself.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fact that the capitalist system is not capable of advancing human culture. It is an enormous dead weight preventing such advancement and, through its promotion of militarism and all forms of political reaction, threatening the cultural achievements of the past.



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