

AFSCME report indicts museums for taking federal money and laying off workers, claims unions offer “protection”

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A recent report from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union documents the degree to which major museums and other institutions in the US have taken federal money during the pandemic and, despite their ability to withstand the crisis, proceeded to destroy tens of thousands of jobs.

The study, carried out by AFSCME’s Cultural Workers United (CWU), provides a damning picture of institutional greed and ruthlessness in regard to workers’ jobs and lives. However, the CWU draws from this analysis the absolutely impermissible conclusion that the solution lies in cultural workers “coming together to form unions,” i.e., that they become dues-paying members of the bureaucratic shells that are the American trade unions.

The CWU report, released earlier this month, notes that as a result of the pandemic revenue generated by cultural institutions through admissions and in-person retail sales was severely slashed. Some 98 percent of those institutions reported closures and, at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, were collectively losing \$33 million a day. Thousands of workers were laid off or furloughed. From a pre-pandemic total of 174,600, museum employment had fallen to 121,300 in May 2020. It had “rebounded a bit” by mid-2021, but “35,900 workers have still not come back.”

As the pandemic took hold in 2020, thousands of museums, zoos, botanical gardens and aquariums applied for and received \$1.61 billion in forgivable loans from the federal government’s Payroll Protection Program (PPP), whose stated purpose was to forestall job losses.

However, the CWU observes, because the protections for workers’ jobs “were inadequate,” museums “with large endowments and multimillion-dollar budgets grabbed more than \$1 billion in taxpayer-funded loans and grants to fill their coffers and then tossed their

workers to the curb.”

The AFSCME report found that “most cultural institutions narrowly complied with the job protections required for loan forgiveness under the program, but the biggest recipients cut jobs or reduced the salaries of their lowest-paid workers at the first opportunity despite having ample resources to keep workers on the payroll. Indeed, many institutions made money during the pandemic while shedding record numbers of jobs.”

The CWU survey points out that the 228 largest museums and other institutions that qualified for PPP funding received more than \$771.4 million in forgivable loans (nearly half the total handed out) through June 1, 2021. These institutions cut their workforce by at least 28 percent, or more than 14,400 jobs. Moreover, of the 69 cultural institutions “for which financial data was available at the time of this analysis, around half ended fiscal year (FY) 2020 with operating surpluses.”

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, for example, despite ending 2020 with a \$2.3 million surplus and receiving \$3.3 million in PPP loans, laid off 97 workers during the pandemic, according to the CWU. The Philadelphia Museum of Art received a \$5.1 million federal loan and then proceeded to reduce its workforce by 127. The Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County, although it ended 2020 “with a \$23.9 million operating surplus and receiving a \$4.8 million PPP loan, still furloughed all 127 part-time employees from March 2020 until at least the end of December 2020.”

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) reported in late October 2020 that 53 percent of museums had cut staffing. A subsequent AAM survey, conducted in March 2021, indicated that 43 percent of museum workers lost income due to the COVID crisis, and the average loss was a 31 percent reduction in total income, or \$21,191 per

worker. More than 60 percent of part-time staff lost income due to reduced hours, salary and benefits. “Thirteen percent of workers,” comments the CWU, “surveyed said they were living paycheck to paycheck.”

The CWU study presents a “left” face. In a section devoted to the structural changes that have taken place in American museums, it remarks that the influence of “rich donors” has grown sharply over the past three decades. Government support “has dwindled” during this period as a share of museum revenue. “As of 2019, only 9 percent of the sector’s overall revenue came from public sources, down from 38 percent in 1989,” while gifts from private donors account for 29.2 percent.

“This heavy reliance on rich donors,” the report continues, “allows wealthy individuals to essentially ‘buy’ a board seat and then dictate the museum’s priorities and control its finances.” Such positions “not only provide the elite with tax deductions for donating millions to nonprofits; they also receive access to politicians, a boost in their status, and rare access to artists and curators, as well as the public recognition that they are ‘giving back.’” A recent *New York Times* study “of 500 board members of the most famous art museums in the United States found that 40 percent came from Wall Street, while the rest accumulated wealth through real estate speculation, fossil fuels, pharmaceuticals and the defense industry, among others.”

This is all very well, but what was AFSCME—the largest union of public employees in the US with more than a million members and nearly \$300 million in assets—doing while the rich were looting the economy, including the cultural sphere, and creating a demi-paradise for themselves at the expense of the working class, including AFSCME members?

In their recent study, the CWU, no doubt composed of individuals with pseudo-left politics, puts forward an argument for workers to join AFSCME. It headlines this section of the report, “The Importance of Cultural Workers Having a Collective Voice.” As though members of the AFL-CIO and other union federations had the slightest say in the operations or decisions of these profoundly anti-democratic, pro-capitalist organizations.

The report asserts that when “adjusted for workforce size, organized or partially organized institutions had an average workforce reduction of 20 percent, while nonunion establishments reduced their workforces by an average of 27 percent.” Assuming these figures are accurate, they hardly amount to a stirring endorsement of AFSCME and the rest of the so-called labor movement. In

the first place, it may well be that unions are implanted in older, larger and more heavily endowed institutions that were somewhat better protected against the pandemic and as a result cut fewer positions. Moreover, that belonging to a given organization means one will bleed to death at a slower rate is not a persuasive argument for signing up. The report cannot point to a single significant struggle launched by AFSCME or any other union in defense of jobs and conditions.

In fact, the role played by the trade unions, “the labor police force comprised of upper-middle-class executives,” as the WSWS has aptly described them, over the course of the pandemic is the most devastating argument against the CWU’s claims. The unions have been indispensable in the process of forcing tens of millions back to work under conditions hazardous to their health.

The CWU survey makes note of the fact that while the pandemic raged, “upper management and directors at the nation’s museums and other cultural institutions continued to get paid salaries in the six and seven figures.” The average annual salary of a director for the sector as a whole was \$317,500 in 2020, while directors of large institutions earned even more.

The report, however, maintains a discreet silence over the salaries of AFSCME officials. The union’s president Lee Saunders received total compensation of \$364,669 in 2019, while secretary-treasurer Elissa McBride had a compensation package worth \$295,789. Donald Zavodny, AFSCME’s director of Area Field Services, fared even better, enjoying total compensation of \$437,714. Dozens of AFSCME officials have salaries in the “six figures.”

Cultural workers, like workers in every other sphere, fighting not only for jobs, wages and better conditions, but to save lives, face a direct conflict with the corporatist unions. They will need to become part of the movement to establish genuine organizations of working class struggle, rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions.



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