The sellout of the Art Gallery of Ontario strike and the subordination of art to the financial oligarchy

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The proposed $100 million expansion for the new wing at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto will bear the name of Dani Reiss, the CEO of the luxury clothing brand Canada Goose. Reiss has provided $35 million in funding, with the Canadian government supplying $25 million under the Green and Inclusive Community Buildings Programme. The remaining $40 million is projected to come from private donations.

The proposed expansion highlights the extent to which the arts are subject to the whims of the financial aristocracy. This becomes especially apparent when the wealth at the top is contrasted with the poverty wages grudgingly shelled out to the workers at one of North America's largest art museums.

The recent month-long strike at the AGO provides a case study regarding the extent to which the ruling elite will go to subordinate the livelihood of workers and all aspects of social life, including culture, to the needs of the profit system.

Four hundred workers at the AGO were on strike from March 26 to April 25. The workers, members of Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) Local 535, include curators, archivists, food and hospitality staff, researchers, instructors, carpenters, electricians and visitor service staff.

They voted by 58 percent in favour of the strike in March after working without a contract since 2022, in part due to the disruption caused by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disastrous "profits before lives" strategy implemented by the ruling class. The immediate grievances leading to the strike centered on cost-of-living adjustments in the face of surging inflation, improved scheduling and concerns over the contracting out of work to third parties.

According to a release by OPSEU Local 535, 85 percent voted in favour of ratifying the collective agreement between the union and the AGO at the end of April. Figures released by the union claim that 281 of the 400, or roughly 70 percent of the striking workers, voted on the contract—hardly a strong vote of confidence.

The new collective agreement will retroactively cover the period from December 1, 2022 to November 30, 2025. Unsurprisingly, the union celebrated the conclusion of the strike in a bombastic tweet, hyperbolically stating, "The first strike at the AGO has been a historic demonstration of collective action—solidarity forever!"

They were celebrating as "historic" a mere 11.4 percent wage increase for part-time and full-time workers. In practical terms, this amounts to a 3.8 percent increase per year. This barely keeps pace with inflation and is insufficient to cover the costs of rent in Toronto, the most expensive city in Canada and one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The average cost for a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto is nearly $2,500 a month. Rents in Canada are, on average, up 8.5 percent year over year, according to the latest CPI report by Statistics Canada. None of these developments are of any concern to the AGO's executives earning six-figure salaries.

Management also agreed to the formation of a "joint committee" to ostensibly regulate the contracting out of labour to third-party providers. Such a committee will only serve to further integrate the union bureaucracy into a corporatist compact with management.

The AGO was founded in 1900 as the Art Museum of Toronto by a group of private citizens. It was renamed two times, first in 1919 as the Art Gallery of Toronto and again in 1966 as the Art Gallery of Ontario. The gallery currently has 90,000 works in its collection, of which 4,000 are publicly exhibited. Among these works the gallery has an extensive Canadian collection, including major works by Group of Seven icons like Lauren Harris, Tom Thompson, Emily Carr and indigenous artists; and European masterworks, including works by Rubens, Gainsborough, van Dyck, the French impressionists, Picasso and others. It also houses the largest public collection of sculptures by Henry Moore, in addition to robust exhibitions of contemporary artists.

The fight to secure access to culture for the broad mass of the population, however, runs up against the profit motive at every step. The AGO receives 33 percent of its revenue in government grants, 28 percent from ticket sales and 27 percent from the private sector. The remaining 12 percent is covered by the amortization of deferred capital contributions, according to a Year in Review report published by the AGO on its website.

The same document reports that the gallery is facing a $3.9 million deficit. This will ultimately be covered by placing the burden on the workers in the form of further wage concessions, contracting out work and, ultimately, layoffs. With the contract concluded at the end of the recent strike set to expire in 2025, this is not a distant prospect.

Significant opposition exists within the workers at the gallery to the poverty-level wages and imperious disregard in which management holds them.

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Recent reviews on the job website Indeed.com give some indication as to the level of discontent. One reviewer, currently employed at the Gallery, wrote, “Extremely toxic place where all employees are dispensable. Management only cares about token optics, the aesthetics of the building, and changing their logo every year. I have not seen a single pay increase in years of working there, but they are building an extension for art, while the employees toil away in the windowless basement. Stay away.”

Others commented on the “toxic” workplace culture, with one reviewer writing, “What is worse than terrible?? The morale here was horrible. Upper management was the worst, they care only about useless spending, not their front line staff.” A review written by a security officer noted what he called the “disconnect between the board of directors” and the rest of the staff. Complaints about scheduling and insufficient hours are also prevalent.

During the strike, workers expressed their anger over the forced departure in November 2023 of Wanda Nanibush, an Indigenous art curator at the gallery. Nanibush was well known for her vocal opposition to Israel’s barbaric treatment of the Palestinians, which she likened to the genocide committed by Canadian imperialism against the country’s Indigenous population.

As with most workforces in the cultural sector, the majority of the staff at the AGO are part-time. At least 60 percent work for meagre part-time wages, earning only $34,380 per year. The Greater Toronto Area has a livable wage threshold of $45,951 a year. A recent report issued by the Ontario Living Wage Network, published in November last year, found that hourly wages would have to be $25.05 an hour to keep pace with the rising cost of living, or more than $50,000 a year.

The pittance given to workers is all the more glaring when one takes into account the exponential growth of salaries in the highest levels of the gallery’s management.

Stephane Jost, the CEO of the museum, makes over $406,000 a year. “Consulting fees” netted him over $391,940 from the AGO foundation alone in 2020-2021. Jost’s salary doubled between 2016 and 2017, the first year of his tenure at the AGO.

According to information disclosed under the Public Sector Salary Disclosure Act (PSSDA), commonly known as the Sunshine List, Michael Mahoney, Executive Director, Corporate Special Projects and Operations, received $340,243 in compensation in 2023. In 2022 his annual salary was reported to be $313, 966, up nearly 60 percent from the year before. The PSSDA lists dozens of executives at the AGO who earn well in excess of $200,000.

The situation at the AGO is par for the course in the lucrative compensation of executives in the “non-profit” sector. Jost, for instance, was recruited by Phillips and Oppenheim, an executive headhunter firm that prides itself on being a fashionable promoter of “diversity, equity, and inclusion.” The same firm was instrumental in bringing Matthew Teitelbaum, the CEO of the AGO before Jost, to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Even the *Toronto Star*, in an otherwise glowing piece singing Jost’s praises in 2016, was forced to comment on the “almost incestuous aspect of the dealmaking.”

Prior to his departure in 2015, Teitelbaum saw his salary increase 206.4 percent from 2008 to 2009 at the height of the Great Recession, from $308,547 in 2008 to an astounding $945, 498. His current position as the CEO of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston netted him $1,036,592 in 2022, according to MassNonprofit News, an independent organization that covers non-profits in Massachusetts.

The excessive compensation at the top, however, is only part of the story. Jost et al are merely the less than humble functionaries of a system that perpetuates inequality. How art should be funded, and who is doing the funding and who owns it is bound up with the increasing importance of wealthy donors as government grants dry up.

Funding for the AGO, as with most arts organizations in Canada, is a bewildering patchwork of grants from all levels of government, ticket sales and donations from private individuals.

Major government grants expanded during the post-World War II economic boom, on the one hand, and through initiatives such as the Royal Commission on Arts and Letters, on the other.

Commonly known as the Massey Commission, after Governor General Vincent Massey who chaired the committee, it advocated increased funding for the arts and the formation of the Canadian Council of the Arts. A significant consideration motivating this proposal was the political objective of creating a unique “Canadian national identity” through the arts to counteract the dominance of foreign cultural imports, particularly from the US. But the days of significant government funding are long gone. The end of the Cold War—the culmination of which was the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR in 1991—coincided with the slashing of funding for the arts.

It was in this context that Kenneth Thomson funded an earlier expansion of the AGO. The late Thomson was the son of the billionaire media mogul Roy Thomson. Thomson gifted $300 million for the 2002 expansion of the gallery that was undertaken by Frank Gehry. Some of Thomson’s personal collection made its way into the gallery.

In addition to an extensive Canadian collection, he also donated Rubens’s *Massacre of the Innocents* to the gallery. He acquired the painting in a bidding war at a Sotheby’s auction in 2002 for $117 million, the largest amount paid for a painting up to that point. Lauren Harris’s *Baffin Island*, another one of Thomson’s acquisitions in a bidding war, was purchased around the same time for $5.1 million, making it the most expensive Canadian painting up to that point.

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