

Australia: NSW Labor government slashes art gallery jobs and programs

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The New South Wales (NSW) Labor government of Premier Chris Minns stepped up its assault on gallery employees and creative workers last week. It released a Change Management Plan, which will destroy an estimated 51 jobs at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) or 10 percent of the 154-year-old institution's total workforce.

The gallery's recently appointed director, Maud Page, told the media on August 12 that the cuts—intended to slash \$7.5 million from its annual budget—were necessary “to ensure the long-term future of the institution.” A previous round of job cuts in June last year eliminated 23 full-time roles and nine additional positions, reducing the budget by \$4.2 million.

AGNSW, the second most visited gallery in Australia, recently underwent a \$344 million expansion. Initiated as part of the Sydney Modern Project, Naala Badu is dedicated to contemporary art exhibitions and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander showings. Since its opening in 2023, the new adjoining four-level standalone facility, along with its associated public art garden, has hosted major exhibitions by Alphonse Mucha, Louise Bourgeois, Jelena Telecki, and others.

The job cuts are being blamed on the new facility's failure to meet projected revenue targets. However, overall visitation to AGNSW has surpassed two million since 2023, even as total NSW state government funding dropped from \$72.4 million in 2024–25 to \$66.6 million for this financial year.

Page told the gallery's *Look* magazine this month: “I want people to walk into this institution and feel at home. I want people to know straight away that this is the gallery for them—that there is something for everyone, particularly children and their families, on

every floor.”

These vague promises cannot be fulfilled under conditions of a drastically reduced workforce, which will struggle to provide the care, attention, and resources required to deliver high-quality exhibitions across the new and existing spaces.

AGNSW management has also committed to raising \$36 million this year through its two gift shops, restaurants, private functions, general box office sales, and increased promotion of its membership packages—putting even greater pressure on already stretched staff. Similar “income-generating” measures were proposed in 2024.

Tuesday's announcement, which has shocked artists and public gallery workers across the state, follows the Minns government's decision in June to slash 91 jobs—or 25 percent of the workforce—at Create NSW, the state's main arts funding agency.

Announced by Arts Minister John Graham, the Create NSW job cuts were accompanied by the termination of four-year funding for numerous smaller public galleries and state-funded arts organisations, particularly in regional areas already struggling to remain operational.

Of the 158 eligible applications for the four-year funding program, only 82 were successful. Those rejected included 18 regional public art galleries—among them Wagga Wagga, Orange, Bathurst, Goulburn, Armidale, Broken Hill, Maitland, Tamworth and Tweed.

Regional galleries rely heavily on government funding to deliver artistic and community-based programs. They often serve as vital cultural hubs, providing social connection, education and even health-related initiatives.

Artists—particularly those based outside of Sydney and other major cities—depend on these galleries for

exhibition opportunities and professional support. Many galleries are now concerned they may be forced to close if they cannot secure alternative funding.

Regional Arts chief executive Tracy Callinan told the media: “We could see 600 arts projects being cancelled or significantly cut, and 5,000 artists and art workers no longer engaged across regional NSW.”

She warned this would lead to “creative black holes” in regional areas, depriving local artists and audiences of cultural opportunities, while shifting the burden to already strained local councils.

Brett Adlington, CEO of Museums & Galleries of NSW, estimated the Minns government’s latest funding decisions amount to a \$1.2 million annual reduction in public gallery funding.

Adlington said: “We fear that programs such as art and dementia, children’s programs, and access initiatives could be the first to go. These organisations often provide early-career opportunities for regional and metropolitan-based artists, offering essential platforms for their work. We’ve heard from many that they will now wind back artist commissions and the development of new, locally relevant programs.”

Galleries in urban areas that missed out on four-year funding included Mosman Art Gallery and Penrith Regional Gallery. Other state-funded organisations—such as Diversity Arts Australia and Writing NSW—saw their funding reduced or eliminated. The future of inner-city Sydney’s Australian Design Centre (ADC) is also now in doubt.

The ADC supports over 1,000 artists each year, holds 18 local exhibitions annually and runs an international touring program. Already operating with a reduced staff, the centre relies on approximately \$500,000 in combined state and federal support. Its recent funding applications to both the federal Labor government and the Minns state government were rejected.

“If we’re not funded, NSW will have the distinction of being the only state in Australia without a craft and design organisation,” said ADC director Lisa Cahill.

The Minns government’s attacks on AGNSW and Create NSW are part of a broader pattern of funding cuts to the arts by both state and federal governments—Labor and Liberal-National alike—over the past two decades. Government claims that they cannot afford to sustain proper arts funding are patently false. Billions remain readily available for militarism

and war, as well as for tax concessions to big business and the wealthy.

While AGNSW management has not finalised where the job cuts will fall, these decisions are being made in close collaboration with the NSW Public Service Association (PSA).

The PSA issued a statement expressing alarm over the proposed job cuts and met with AGNSW members on Wednesday to discuss the issue. The union’s concerns are hollow. Having rubber-stamped all previous job cuts at the gallery, it is doing its utmost to hose down internal opposition, urging members to send protest emails while diverting the already overstretched workforce into more budget-reduction deals with management.

PSA officials are, in fact, active members of the government’s so-called Cultural Institution Advisory Group, established in February 2024 to determine how best to cut costs at state-funded cultural institutions. The group includes Arts Minister John Graham, senior government officials, and PSA representatives from AGNSW, the State Library, the Australian Museum, the Powerhouse Museum and the Museums of History.

It would be difficult to overstate the harm being done by this deliberate undermining of state-funded galleries and cultural institutions. Free access to high-quality artistic work for all sections of society—especially working-class families, students and youth—is a crucial part of building a thoughtful, informed and critically engaged population.

The struggle against escalating government attacks on arts funding is bound up with the broader fight for the independent political and industrial mobilisation of workers and youth across Australia—alongside their international counterparts—against the capitalist system itself, which subordinates every aspect of social, economic and cultural life to profit accumulation.



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