

Australian state Labor governments deepen assault on cultural institutions

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Scores of workers at publicly funded museums and galleries in Australia are under attack as state Labor governments in Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) impose major job cuts and other destructive measures.

On August 11, Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW) management revealed that the state Labor government's "Change Management Plan" will eliminate 51 jobs—or 10 percent of full-time positions. That is part of a \$7.5 million budget reduction imposed by the administration of Premier Chris Minns on the historic facility. The latest cuts followed a June announcement that 91 jobs—or 25 percent of the total workforce—would be slashed at Create NSW, the state's principal arts funding agency.

Two weeks later, it was disclosed that Museums Victoria—the largest public museum organisation in Australia—plans to cut 55 full-time roles as part of a four-year, \$56 million budget reduction mandated by the Labor government of Premier Jacinta Allan.

Museums Victoria venues—the Melbourne Museum (which includes an IMAX cinema), the Immigration Museum, Scienceworks and the Royal Exhibition Building—receive 2 million visitors annually, including 250,000 schoolchildren.

The organisation holds more than 17 million items acquired over the past two centuries, including some of the most significant collections of Australian Indigenous cultural material in the world. It also delivers a wide range of online research and education programs and is responsible for the continued development of the state's collections.

Labor's assault on this revered institution—and its highly skilled workforce—includes scrapping a planned \$40 million IT upgrade and halving the existing IT budget. Ticket prices will also rise, from \$15 to \$18, increasing to \$20 by July 2027. For the first time,

management plans to charge entry fees for children, concession-card holders and students.

Further budget cuts will affect the Immigration Museum, and funding for the renewal of its exhibition gallery has been deferred.

These measures are part of the Allan government's latest austerity budget, which aims to reduce the state's \$155 billion debt by cutting an estimated 3,000 public sector jobs.

Despite widespread public opposition to the government's attack on museum workers, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) has opposed any mobilisation of its members to resist this destruction.

The "left" leadership of the CPSU—recently elected on a platform of defending public sector jobs and conditions—has yet to even acknowledge the job cuts on its website or social media, let alone express opposition or call a stop-work meeting.

In fact, the first public report of the cuts was from the *Age* newspaper in late August, which published a leaked video of a Museums Victoria CEO address to a mass staff meeting two weeks earlier.

A parallel situation exists with the Public Service Association (PSA), a NSW affiliate of the CPSU that covers AGNSW workers. Having previously collaborated with both Liberal and Labor governments on cost-cutting measures, the PSA held a one-hour rally late last month regarding the planned elimination of 51 jobs at the gallery.

This lunchtime event was not intended to initiate a genuine struggle against job losses, but to dissipate the anger of the 100 or so AGNSW workers and their supporters, while the union continued negotiations with management on how best to implement the \$7.5 million cut. Held in Hyde Park, opposite the 154-year-old

gallery, the PSA leadership denounced NSW Arts Minister John Graham.

PSA Senior Industrial Officer Anne Kennelly told the demonstration that the job cuts affected curators, registration staff, conservationists, exhibition team members, designers, digital content staff and public program workers. However, she failed to mention the museum job cuts in Victoria, those at Create NSW, or the associated slashing of grant funding to scores of regional galleries and other state-funded organisations.

Similarly, union officials said nothing about the situation at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), which—after years of inadequate funding from successive NSW governments, both Labor and Liberal—began charging a \$20 entry fee in January 2025 to remain operational. Annual recurring government funding for the MCA stands at just \$4.36 million, covering only 14 percent of its operating costs. That figure has remained unchanged since 2008.

The PSA official simply urged attendees at the Hyde Park rally to send protest letters to Arts Minister Graham and await the outcome of further negotiations with management. In other words, the PSA is subordinating workers to feckless appeals to the government, while it signals its willingness to accept alternative cost-cutting measures.

This is a well-worn path. PSA officials sit on the government's so-called Cultural Institution Advisory Group, established in February 2024 to determine how best to slash costs at state-funded cultural institutions.

As members of this group, the PSA approved job cuts in June 2024 that eliminated 23 full-time roles and nine additional positions to reduce AGNSW's budget by \$4.2 million.

These measures were followed by this year's job losses at Create NSW and funding cuts that led to the rejection of more than 75 applications for the four-year funding program for smaller regional public galleries and state-funded arts organisations, including Design NSW. Among the 18 regional galleries whose applications were denied were locations in Wagga Wagga, Orange, Bathurst, Goulburn, Armidale, Broken Hill, Maitland, Tamworth and Tweed.

On August 28, the Minns government announced a round of two-year grants, providing an additional \$15.4 million to 62 organisations. While the Minns government claimed to be "expanding" its support for

the arts, these claims are bogus. Only three of the 18 major regional galleries regained four-year funding. Three galleries—Broken Hill, Goulburn and Moree—lost funding in both the four-year and two-year rounds.

On Tuesday, the PSA held a lunchtime protest outside the NSW parliament. The event was timed to coincide with the end of the "consultation process" between the government, the union and management.

The union had met with the minister days earlier, declaring its discussions were "positive."

The reality is that the PSA is overseeing the destruction of hundreds of public sector job cuts throughout NSW—in transport, education, water and other key areas. As with AGNSW workers, the union is isolating each section of these workers from each other.

The cuts to arts funding by the Victorian and NSW state Labor governments are taking place amid growing opposition from public sector workers across the country—including nurses, doctors, teachers, rail drivers, and others—over attacks on jobs, wages and understaffing. In every case, these workers confront government austerity programs enforced by the trade union apparatus.

To fight the attacks on state-funded cultural institutions, museum and gallery workers must reach out to other public sector workers and form rank-and-file workplace committees for unified statewide and national action. These committees must be independent of the trade union bureaucracies, which are inseparably tied to the Labor Party and enforce its pro-business agenda.

Free access to arts and history must not be a privilege reserved for the wealthy. Like public healthcare, education, and housing, it must be fully funded and available to all. This requires a socialist perspective and a direct challenge to the capitalist system, which demands private ownership and profit from every aspect of art and culture.



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