

# Australia: Writers Victoria to close as state Labor government slashes arts funding

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Late last year, Creative Victoria, the Allan Labor government's arts funding body, suddenly announced that it was ending four-year funding to Writers Victoria, the state's peak body for writers.

The decision is part of Labor's attempt to impose the burden of its \$167.6 billion debt through sharp cuts to government spending and the destruction of 1,000 public sector jobs, brutally impacting health, education and vital social services.

The cost-cutting assault, cynically titled *Backing Our Creative Organisations, Jobs and Cultural Life*, includes axing funds to the Abbotsford Convent, a National Heritage-listed building and popular arts precinct in Melbourne, and other smaller arts support organisations.

In 2022, 93 state-based organisations received Creative Enterprise Program (CEP) grants. This has been dropped down to 81 organisations and the CEP funding pool reduced from \$21.2 million in the 2022–25 period to \$17.9 million for 2026–29. Previous four-year funding grants for some organisations have been cut to two years, foreshadowing future closures.

Writers Victoria, a 37-year-old organisation serving about 3,000 members, has been given emergency funding until June 2026—a timed shut-off valve. Unless other financial backers are found, the organisation will not be able to pay wages, cover rent, honour contracts with tutors, or provide professional assistance, and will shut down. This would make Victoria the only mainland state without a state government-funded peak organisation for writers.

Like other arts bodies, Writers Victoria has faced years of shrinking government support. These cuts, combined with rising operational costs, pushed the organisation close to insolvency in 2024.

Writers Victoria chair Janice Gobey said she was shocked by the decision and told the media that the peak body had been left “swinging in the wind.” The

organisation's volunteer board, she said, had “worked hard” to transform it “from a position of potential insolvency [in 2024] to one that is now breaking even and even generating a small surplus.”

Abbotsford Convent, located in Melbourne's inner north, had its \$800,000 four-year funding axed outright. The precinct houses more than 100 studios, galleries and arts organisations in 11 heritage buildings, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

In the early 2000s, the site was earmarked for sale and redevelopment. In 2004, the Bracks Labor government intervened after sustained community opposition made a sell-off politically dangerous.

Labor's “rescue”—handing the site to a not-for-profit trust—was a politically expedient compromise, not a guarantee of ongoing public funding. Faced with widespread popular concern over the fate of the heritage site, Labor posed as its saviour while shifting the burden and risk of its day-to-day survival onto a community organisation.

Two decades later, the Allan government—under pressure from both the banks to slash spending and property developers salivating over future profits from the 6.4-hectare site—has simply eliminated all funding to the arts precinct.

While the Allan government declares it must reduce its debt, the cost of maintaining Writers Victoria and Abbotsford Convent is microscopic compared to the billions of dollars state and federal Labor governments spend on preparations for war, and on handouts to corporations through bailouts, cost blowouts and tax concessions.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), which claim to represent many workers in the sector, have responded with silence, continuing their role as enforcers

of Labor's austerity program in the cultural sector.

The CPSU and the MEAA have not issued a press statement, let alone called meetings or industrial action to mobilise their members in defence of Writers Victoria or Abbotsford Convent. Their response is entirely predictable.

In New South Wales, the Public Service Association (PSA) has played a similar role. It sits on the state government's "Cultural Institution Advisory Group," established to oversee cuts at galleries, museums and libraries, and has played a key role in government cuts to the arts.

PSA officials signed off on job losses at the Art Gallery of NSW, then staged a token one-hour rally when further positions were destroyed—an outlet for anger while the reductions went ahead.

Last year, State Library of Victoria (SLV) management in Melbourne, in line with the government's budget cuts, announced plans to eliminate dozens of positions, gut reference services and shift the 171-year-old institution toward shallow "digital experiences." Library workers and users warned that "the halving of the number of crucial reference librarians" and related cuts would strike at the heart of the library's public role.

For weeks, the union leadership, which was calling for negotiations with the state government on public sector job cuts, kept SLV management's plan from public view. Only when a campaign developed—open letters from leading internationally acclaimed writers, researchers and other well-known figures, and thousands of signatures—did the union step forward to posture as a representative of staff.

Confronting popular opposition to the destruction of SLV jobs and services, management withdrew the restructure—not because the CPSU organised a fight, but because rising popular anger threatened to undermine the union's negotiations with Labor over other public sector job cuts.

The fear of both the government and the unions is that such protests could encourage calls for unified action by public sector workers against all government cuts. The tactical withdrawal of SLV's restructuring proposal has not altered the government's agenda, which is being pushed through with the active support of the CPSU, institution by institution.

Writers Victoria provides invaluable assistance to writers through low-cost classes, feedback and mentoring. Its destruction will mean courses run by for-profit agencies aimed at those who can pay full rates, and fewer

opportunities for working-class people to develop their own voices and stories.

Labor, and the financial interests it serves, are hostile to these concerns. The political elite fears serious artistic work that sensitises the population, encourages critical thinking that challenges the existing order and, above all, the profit system. Its priority is to meet fiscal "targets" demanded by big business and the banks, which means eliminating government spending on education, health and other essential social services that do not bolster profits.

*Creative State 2028*, the Victorian government's so-called strategy for the arts, claims to "champion our vibrant literary culture, diverse writers, publishers, bookshops and readers." This is so much hot air. Those seeking CEP grants are required to submit detailed "risk assessments" and multi-year strategic plans. As *Creative Victoria* makes clear, applications are judged and funding is only given to "resilient" groups if they maximise "return on investment" in the state's annual \$41 billion arts sector.

A petition has been launched on the Parliament of Victoria website, with more than 2,500 people calling on the government to reverse the decision and restore funding. These appeals will fall on deaf ears.

Cultural workers—writers, librarians, museum and gallery staff, educators—must reach out to nurses, teachers, rail and transport workers confronting Labor's attacks.

This means establishing rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to the union apparatus, to fight for a socialist and internationalist program. Such policies would include increased spending in all areas of social need, including the arts, and the recognition that free access to arts, literature and culture is a basic social right of the working class.



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