

Strike vote at London's V&A Museum exposes exploitation at the heart of Britain's "world class" cultural sector

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The near-unanimous vote at London's Victoria and Albert Museum has torn aside the institution's carefully cultivated image as a beacon of cultural enlightenment.

PCS union members at the V&A have voted by 95.4 percent on a turnout of 87 percent for strike action over poverty pay, unsafe conditions and the brutal impact of this summer's heatwaves. The ballot, which closed August 20, covers all four V&A London sites—South Kensington, East Storehouse, East Museum and Young V&A. Prospect union members at the V&A also overwhelmingly voted for strike action in a separate ballot in July.

The call for strike action is the latest in a wave of industrial disputes sweeping Britain's museums and galleries.

Workers at the National Galleries of Scotland struck during the Fringe Festival in early August; Royal Museums Greenwich staff walked out for two days the same month; the London Museum and Tate have both seen action in the past year; and a dispute at the National Coal Mining Museum ran from August 2025 to April 2026.

The V&A workers are demanding an acceptable pay offer, Real Living Wage accreditation, 1.5x pay on bank holidays, and heat mitigation measures—including access to drinking water, a policy of closing public-facing areas at 30 degrees, and additional protections for back-of-house staff. The demands are modest.

As the museum's own annual reports confirm, the median salary among its employees rose from £28,500 in March 2021 to just £33,764 in March 2025, while the Retail Prices Index indicates it should have reached £38,190—meaning almost a 12 percent real-terms cut.

Even on the government's preferred Consumer Prices Index, which excludes homeowner housing costs and council tax, the cut is around 4 percent.

That workers are having to ballot for strike action to secure drinking water in a heatwave is itself an indictment of conditions at the institution.

PCS General Secretary Fran Heathcote declared that the vote "sends a very clear message to V&A management: our members will not accept being undervalued, ignored or put at risk at work." She urged that management "needs to stop shutting the door on its own staff and start negotiating seriously."

Heathcote's plea followed an August 10 joint statement with Prospect that called on V&A director Tristram Hunt and his leadership team to "start showing that they care about their workforce and get properly back around the negotiating table." The statement was issued after Hunt refused to attend negotiations with Acas, the state's industrial relations mediation body.

A 95 percent strike mandate on an 87 percent turnout is an overwhelming expression of workers' willingness to fight. The union's response is not to issue an ultimatum, not to call for solidarity action from workers at every other museum and gallery in dispute, but to plead with a director who will not even sit down with Acas.

Union officials are asking for "serious" negotiations with an employer that has spent decades imposing real-terms pay cuts and denied workers water in a heatwave.

No strike dates have been set. The PCS promises "coordination strike action with Prospect on dates that will be confirmed in due course." The union bureaucracy is buying time to negotiate a settlement it

can sell as a victory, no matter how far short of workers' demands it falls.

Cultural workers cannot afford to trust the PCS bureaucracy to wage a fight. Its record in the culture sector is instructive. The PCS leadership isolated the 100-day strike in 2015 at the National Gallery. Simultaneous strike action at the National Museum of Wales was voted for but suspended, and at National Museums Scotland was kept separate and restricted. The National Gallery dispute ended with a two-tier outsourced system.

At the British Library in 2025, the PCS funnelled workers into lobbying MPs, securing support from just 19 of 650. The strike, taking place over six months, was ended this February with a 4 percent pay deal. This was below workers' demands and RPI inflation and came after a below-inflation deal the year before.

The strategy today is the same: each dispute kept in its own silo, with no perspective of escalating action across the sector, and no political challenge to the Labour government whose austerity has produced the crisis.

The unions are in a partnership with Labour, which continues the right-wing politics of its Tory predecessors. Government spending on culture stands at 0.17 percent of GDP: among the lowest rates in Europe. Local authority cultural spending has halved over 14 years. Some 525 museums have closed since 2000.

Hunt personifies the unity of the Labour Party, the state and the corporate management of cultural institutions. A millionaire former Blairite MP and shadow education secretary, he championed austerity, privatisation and imperialist war.

At the V&A, he has imposed austerity-aligned restructuring: intensified workloads, below-inflation pay, no London Living Wage accreditation, and contempt for those protesting the heatwave conditions at V&A East — where Prospect members confronted “Amazon-style” break restrictions and dangerous heat stress.

The V&A and other museum strikes mark a rebellion against the transformation of museums into quasi-corporate enterprises, sustained by unpaid volunteer labour. Independent museums recorded 38,900 volunteers contributing 518,000 days of unpaid work in 2023, valued at £41 million. Conditions for paid staff

are systematically degraded.

Workers reject a model in which vital cultural institutions are sustained by low-paid labour and goodwill while management pursues commercial expansion. Museums, like hospitals, universities and other public goods, are workplaces where exploitation must be confronted. But doing so means breaking out of the straitjacket imposed by the union leadership and mounting a struggle against the right-wing agenda of the Labour government.

What is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees in every institution to draw up lists of demands. These committees must be independent of and opposed to the union bureaucracy, and so capable of coordinating action across the sector and reaching out to workers in other industries.

Bus drivers in London, for example, have launched their own strikes against inadequate protections in extreme heat (suspended by Unite last week).

The cultural sector is the common property of all workers and should be defended by the entire working class against government and corporate cuts. V&A workers and all workers in the cultural sector should contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to begin building and organising this broad base of support.



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