

V&A workers strike over pay, conditions and government cuts: “We make the museum what it is”

Our reporters
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The walkout at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) has stripped away the museum’s polished public image, revealing the harsh realities faced by its workforce.

Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) members at the V&A 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 covered all four V&A London sites—South Kensington, East Storehouse, East Museum and Young V&A. Prospect members also voted overwhelmingly for action in a separate July ballot.

More than 300 workers are involved in the dispute. They are demanding a minimum 4 percent] pay offer, that the museum become an accredited London Living Wage employer within 12 months, time-and-a-half pay on bank holidays, and heat mitigation—including access to drinking water, closing public-facing areas at 30 degrees, and additional protections for back-of-house staff.

A striker described a long arc of deterioration: “Since the financial crash in 2008, our wages have deteriorated hugely. We had three years with no increase at all... Between 2009 and 2019, there was just one year when we had an increase maybe a little bit over inflation. So, we’re losing money every year.” The museum’s own annual reports confirm that between 2021 and 2025 workers suffered a real-term cut of almost 12 percent.

The consequences are brutal. “Our rent goes up. Utilities go up. Train fares go up... Every year you sit down and think, okay, what luxuries can I eliminate? What non-essentials? And we’re cut to the bone.” He added, “If you want to be able to afford a mortgage, if

you want to be able to afford a family, you can’t do that if you work here”, he continued.

Another striker emphasised the demand for London Living Wage accreditation—£14.80 an hour in a city where the national £12.70 makes it difficult to live. “Most of the team survive on London Living Wage, and that’s still not enough... We want to know that every passing year we’re guaranteed it. But they’re just stalling, and stalling.”

For immigrant workers, the pressures are extreme: Another striker said, “I had to pay almost £5,000 for my visa last year... If I didn’t live with my partner, I could have been evicted. I really don’t have money, I struggle every month.”

A long-serving worker described the stripping away of rights: “They [museum management] removed the civil servant pension... no longer a paid lunch... unpaid breaks. You have to work more to get just about what you had.”

This summer’s record-breaking heatwaves were “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Young V&A and South Kensington have no air conditioning. “They’ve decided it’s too hot for us to work at 35 degrees but there’s no upper legal limit in this country.”

Management repeatedly closed Young V&A because “most of the AC is in the galleries with objects... there’s no AC in back of house, so they were clearly thinking a lot more about the objects than the people working inside of these places.”

At the East Museum, low pay intersects with basic deprivation: “There’s just no good food offering... Café Jikoni is incredibly expensive.” The East Storehouse, a worker said, was “built with objects in mind, not people... staff are not allowed to carry water” because

all the floors are grated and it might drip onto the art objects below. Front of house workers became so overstretched bringing objects to visitors on request “a lot of them couldn’t drink, couldn’t go to the bathroom.”

These conditions are the direct outcome of a funding model that prioritises objects, donors and trustees over the workforce that makes the museums accessible. Workers linked their conditions to government policy. “The DCMS [Department for Culture, Media and Sport] has cut the grant... Under the Tories, they just put the squeeze on heritage... the grant never keeps up with inflation, so in real terms it falls.”

Some workers hoped that a Labour government would reverse the damage. One striker said, “We maybe had been hoping, unrealistically, when Labour got back in again, that support for the arts would be revived. I’d like to think that was going to happen.” Instead, they see continuity: The striker said he came from a country that “had a lot of experience with right-wing governments. Everybody took notes [of the experience], and now everything is in that direction.”

That continuity is embodied in V&A director Tristram Hunt—a former right-wing Labour MP who championed austerity, privatisation and imperialist war. At the V&A, Hunt—who is paid at least £150,000 a year—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.

“The amount of history and heritage in this country is phenomenal... it attracts a huge amount of revenue from tourism. So why isn’t the government helping us make that experience the best it can be?” one striker explained.

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.

With public funding eroded, institutions turn to private money—but workers pay the price. “They can’t really reduce the amount of funding to workers as well, because we make the institution what it is... If you go to a museum and everybody treats you awfully, you’re not going to like the art.”

“I didn’t really see much of a difference with the change of prime ministers... it’s like soiling your

trousers then changing your shirt.”

Another added: “The political system in the UK is the most gaslighting I’ve ever seen—creating discontent, then blaming the very people they ask to vote for them: the working class.”

In statements to the press, V&A management said they were “disappointed” by the strike and claimed to have offered a “competitive pay award”. The strikers dismissed these claims. “They talk about financial pressures, but the V&A is not struggling with money. We know how much money the V&A has—they have to publish the financial reports. They have the money to help us.”

The V&A action is a significant expression of workers’ willingness to fight and their striving for unified action. Their militancy forced the PCS and Prospect unions to take the unusual step of calling the strikes on the same days.

But workers cannot afford to trust the PCS or Prospect bureaucracy.

In 2015, the PCS isolated a 100-day strike at the National Gallery, which ended with a two-tier outsourced system. At the British Library in 2025, it funnelled workers into lobbying MPs—securing support from just 19 of 650—and ended the dispute with a below-inflation deal.

In the current dispute the unions have responded with pleas to a director who refused even to attend negotiations with ACAS, the state’s mediation body. 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.

What is required is a struggle against the union leadership and the right-wing agenda of the Labour government to which it is attached. Workers should form rank-and-file committees—acting independent of the union hierarchy—in every institution to draw up lists of demands, and which can coordinate action across the sector and reach out to workers in other industries.



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