Arts Centre Melbourne workers strike against real-wage cuts

Mitya Moor, Eric Ludlow
14 September 2026

Several hundred workers at Arts Centre Melbourne, Australia's largest performing arts complex, held a 24-hour strike on Friday, September 11, against a below-inflation pay offer and deteriorating conditions. The state government-run venue, in the centre of Melbourne, employs about 900 people, around 600 of them casuals. Strikers included ushers, food and beverage attendants, cleaners, ticketing workers, stage managers, programmers, electricians and sound and lighting technicians.

The stoppage is part of a broader emergence of working-class struggle in Victoria and across Australia, with health workers, teachers and other sections of workers taking strike action against real-wage cuts, chronic understaffing and intolerable workloads.

Workers maintained a picket outside Hamer Hall from the afternoon and held a rally there that evening. In a powerful demonstration of workers' determination to fight, the stoppage forced the closure of Hamer Hall and the cancellation or postponement of three performances: US singer Macy Gray's concert, *GRIMM* and *Burn the Floor: Luminous*.

Arts Centre Melbourne is operated by the Victorian Arts Centre Trust, a state government statutory authority. The workers' action followed shorter stoppages that delayed five performances earlier this month. These were described as the first industrial action in the centre's history.

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and Electrical Trades Union (ETU) have been negotiating a new enterprise agreement since March. They rejected management's offer of a 3 percent annual wage increase, in line with the Victorian Labor government's public-sector wage cap. This would be a real-wage cut, with official inflation already at 3.5 percent.

As a result of the previous union-brokered enterprise agreement, Arts Centre workers' wages have fallen 10 percent in comparison with inflation since 2022. Nearly 40 percent of the workforce is classified at Band 1, the lowest pay classification in the expired agreement. The derisory 2 percent per annum nominal pay increases in the last union-management agreement saw many pay rates in this band fell below the national legal minimum, forcing the centre to lift them after the latest minimum-wage review.

Sophie O'Donovan, a striking worker, explained in a video published by the MEAA on Instagram: "We were offered… [a] 3 percent pay rise, which is just not enough… Our colleagues get two jobs, three jobs, four jobs… just to pay the way."

The unions are seeking annual pay rises of 7 percent, as well as back pay from October 2025. This is entirely inadequate to keep up with the soaring cost of living and recoup past losses imposed in sellout union deals.

For a permanent Arts Centre employee on the current national minimum of $26.44 an hour, 7 percent amounts to just $1.85 an hour. A minimum-rate casual receiving $33.05 an hour would gain $2.31 an hour—but, with no guaranteed hours, a worker rostered for 20 hours would receive only about $46 extra before tax that week.

The current dispute also takes place amid a broader assault on the arts and culture. Funding committed through Creative Victoria's Creative Enterprises Program fell from $81.2 million in 2022 to $59.4 million in 2026. Writers Victoria, the Abbotsford Convent, Musica Viva and other organisations have had public funding eliminated or sharply reduced.

The unions have sought to limit the dispute to plaintive appeals to the Victorian Labor government to increase funding to the centre. This is not just a political dead-end. It is a deliberate attempt by the bureaucracy to cover up the reality: The attack on arts funding and wages is just one component of Labor's broader assault on jobs, wages and conditions throughout the public sector—aided and abetted by the union bureaucracies in every industry.

Workers should place no confidence in such appeals or in the union apparatuses conducting them, which have worked hand-in-glove with successive governments for decades to enforce the deterioration of wages and conditions.

In March, more than 2,000 journalists and staff at the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation held a 24-hour strike, their first in 20 years, opposing real-wage cuts. By early May, the MEAA and CPSU rammed through a sellout agreement delivering a nominal wage rise just 0.5 percentage points higher over three years.

In 2023, CPSU Victorian secretary Karen Batt boasted that the union had "co-operated" with the state Labor government to deliver $3.6 billion in "savings" and reduce the public service workforce by more than 2,000. In 2025, when the Victorian state Labor government under premier Jacinta Allan announced plans to eliminate up to another 3,000 positions, the CPSU leadership appealed for consultation rather than organising a unified fight against the cuts.

During a 2023 strike by tens of thousands of US actors and writers, the MEAA issued an eight-point directive telling Australian performers and crews that work on local productions would continue as normal. This helped prevent the international extension of a struggle against the same global entertainment conglomerates.

The Arts Centre strike is part of a growing movement of workers against Labor's program of austerity. More than 10,000 Victorian health workers struck in January; around 1,500 allied health workers rallied during a statewide stoppage in August; and tens of thousands of Victorian public school teachers and support staff struck twice this year.

Increasingly, these workers are not just coming up against the state Labor government, but the union bureaucracy that claims to represent them. This is most sharply expressed in the educators' dispute, in which workers twice rejected Australian Educators Union-Labor sellout deals, despite the anti-democratic methods employed by the bureaucracy.

This poses the need for workers to take matters into their own hands. should build a rank-and-file committee, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the CPSU, MEAA and ETU bureaucracies. Through such a committee, workers can formulate demands based on workers' needs, not what the government or unions say is affordable. As a starting point, these could include: An immediate pay rise far in excess of inflation to restore past losses; automatic cost-of-living adjustments; secure employment and guaranteed hours; protection of penalty rates; and safe staffing levels.

Arts Centre workers should appeal directly to performers, freelance crews, audiences and workers across cultural institutions, education, health and the public sector for coordinated action. The defence of wages and conditions is inseparable from the fight for fully funded, universally accessible culture. That requires a political struggle against the subordination of art and every essential public service to government austerity, corporate profit and the dictates of the financial markets.