Budget crisis prompts closure of oldest natural history museum in the Western Hemisphere

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The oldest natural history museum in the western hemisphere has just closed its doors. Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences has ceased operations. The 198-year-old institution holds one of the world's largest collections of scientific specimens and a historic display of dinosaur fossils. It has played a vital role in educating generations of Philadelphia's young people in the wonders of the natural world.

First opened in 1828, it moved to its current location on Benjamin Franklin Parkway in 1876. Its closing is one example of increasing assault on funding of cultural and scientific institutions. The museum, which has been run by Drexel University since 2011, has been hit by a decline in attendance due to the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing operating expenses. However, a public campaign to save the museum has boosted revenue by more than 20 percent over the last year. Nevertheless, Drexel, which did not participate in the fundraising efforts, has continued with plans to close the museum.

The university has not provided any public explanation as to why it seems determined to close the historic and much-loved institution, despite the fact that a local foundation has offered to fund the museum for at least a year. However, there is speculation that, due to its own financial difficulties, Drexel plans to sell the building which is valued at more than $28 million to staunch its own loss of revenue, due in part to declining enrollment.

There is much concern over the fate of the museum's large and scientifically valuable collections, which include over 19 million biological specimens, and hundreds of thousands of volumes, journals, illustrations, photographs and archival items in its library. The Academy preserves many type specimens, the reference material that helped establish a species' identity. They also preserved additional specimens with which scientists investigated the nature of these species, their relationships with other species, their evolutionary history or their conservation status.

Drexel states that it will find alternate housing and continue to provide access to researchers, but no specific plans have been announced. However, there will no longer be public exhibitions. Thus, the loss of the academy as an educational resource seems certain.

The demise of the Philadelphia academy is not an isolated occurrence, but instead simply one example of the growing capitalist rush to divert all resources toward war and dictatorship.

Budget cuts have had a devastating and accelerating impact on both cultural and scientific organizations, and the WSWS has documented this process across decades and across countries. The common thread is that austerity is not a technical fiscal adjustment but a deliberate subordination of culture and science to the profit requirements of capital.

In the United States, the combined effect of declining corporate sponsorship and government cuts produced what the WSWS called a "genuine calamity" for arts organizations, with 10,000 groups threatened. The COVID-19 pandemic then compounded the crisis, with orchestras, opera companies and museums imposing major cuts on their workers.

This has been the trend for decades but has accelerated during the Trump administration. Leaked documents revealed Trump's proposal to halve NASA's science budget, with the attack focused on climate research and continuing the trend of

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subordinating science to private profit.

Recent US data illustrates the pressure. In the American Alliance of Museums' 2025 survey, 34 percent of responding museums said government grants or contracts had been canceled, and among museums that lost federal funds, 67 percent said they had not replaced that funding through foundations, sponsors or donors.

What unites these cases is that the cuts are not the product of scarcity but of a social system in which culture and science are treated as costs to be minimized unless they can be turned to profit. The WSWS's analysis is that the destruction of cultural institutions narrows the intellectual horizons of the working class, while the gutting of basic research—particularly climate science—serves the immediate interests of the corporations and governments that profit from the status quo. The defense of culture and science is therefore inseparable from the struggle against austerity and the capitalist system that imposes it.

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