Watch: Melbourne artists rally against Labor government's arts funding cuts

Our reporters
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Hundreds of artists and cultural workers rallied in Melbourne on Monday, November 9, against the Victorian state Labor government's slashing of arts funding, less than three weeks before the November 28 state election.

The protest, titled "Rally for the Arts," was organised by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) and the Don't Break Our Arts campaign amid growing anger over funding cuts threatening cultural institutions, jobs and the livelihoods of artists.

Under Labor, the Creative Enterprises Program funding pool has been slashed from $21.2 million for 2022–25 to $17.9 million for 2026–29, while the number of funded organisations has fallen from 93 to 81. Longstanding cultural organisations including Writers Victoria and the Abbotsford Convent have lost their funding.

The rally reflected genuine anger among artists and cultural workers. Speakers described increasingly precarious employment, inadequate remuneration and exploitative conditions resembling those of the "gig economy." Funding cuts threaten not only the jobs and livelihoods of artists but the survival of cultural organisations and access to art more broadly.

Despite this anger, MEAA officials offered no perspective beyond appeals to the parliamentary parties responsible for imposing austerity.

Ursula Searle, Victorian Equity Section President of the MEAA, told the rally: "This election, we need everyone to be telling the Victorian government what we want. … So let's go to this election, and let's absolutely call on every single political party, every single MP. Let's shout out loud exactly what we want. … We want long-term investment."

The MEAA's electoral appeals amounted to a veiled call for a Labor-Greens vote, without openly naming Labor, the party responsible for the cuts. Rather than organising a struggle against the attacks, the union promoted the illusion that pressure on the parliamentary establishment could compel it to defend cultural funding.

The MEAA's record demonstrates the bankruptcy of this perspective. In September, Arts Centre Melbourne workers struck against falling real wages amid the cost-of-living crisis. The unions ended the industrial campaign with an agreement providing nominal wage rises of 5 percent in the first year and 4 percent in each of the following two years, failing to restore the substantial real-wage losses workers had suffered under the previous agreement.

The Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) candidate for the Northern Metropolitan upper-house region, Morgan Peach, requested to address the rally but was refused by the organisers, who claimed that the speakers' list had already been finalised. His proposed remarks would have cut across the MEAA's promotion of appeals to the parliamentary parties, raising broader political issues entirely absent from the union officials' speeches.

In his prepared remarks, Peach declared: "The assault on culture is part of a far broader assault on the social rights of working people. Governments around the world are attacking healthcare, education and other basic needs. We are told there is no money for hospitals, schools or the arts. But there are tens of billions for war, while corporate profits and the fortunes of billionaires are protected."

Peach condemned the Albanese Labor government's backing for US imperialist wars, including the genocide in Gaza, and its transformation of Australia into a frontline base for a catastrophic war against China. The

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Victorian Labor government, he explained, was imposing its own austerity agenda as part of this offensive.

"The attack on culture is not only financial. Artists, writers and performers who have spoken out against the mass murder of Palestinians have faced censorship, intimidation and threats to their livelihoods. The turn to war and austerity goes hand in hand with increasingly authoritarian measures to suppress opposition and critical thought."

Peach opposed the MEAA's appeals to Labor and the other parliamentary parties, insisting that the defence of culture required a broader struggle.

"Art cannot save itself. Its defence requires a united movement of the working class. Artists and cultural workers must join forces with teachers, healthcare workers and others who have already entered into major struggles against cuts to jobs, wages and services."

He pointed to the role of the Labor-affiliated trade union bureaucracies in isolating these struggles and confining opposition to limited protests.

"Just as in the 1930s, the defence of culture is a revolutionary question. Its future depends on a movement of the working class against a capitalist system plunging humanity towards world war, dictatorship and barbarism."

Peach concluded by outlining the SEP's socialist perspective: "The banks and major corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control. Society's immense resources must be used to meet human needs, including the fullest development of art and culture, not private profit and war."

SEP campaigners spoke with artists and young people attending the rally.

Mercy, a visual artist and student at Victoria University, described the cuts as "an absolute slap in the face. The money taken from arts spending is not going towards useful things, but to wasteful things like war and genocide."

She condemned the Australian Labor government's collaboration with the US and Israel: "The Australian government is giving billions to the military, they're collaborating with the US and Israel. The money and weapons are going straight to the IDF and the killing of innocent people."

Mercy said the diversion of resources towards war was an international phenomenon, pointing to poverty, inadequate education and suffering in Sudan, Congo and elsewhere. She also condemned extreme social inequality and the domination of the arts industry by private profit.

On the censorship of writer Randa Abdel-Fattah, Mercy said: "The government doesn't want artists to talk about Gaza or other war crimes because they support it and they're involved. They don't want artists or anyone to have free speech."

Victor, a Year 10 student, said: "This slashing of the arts is horrible. Art is incredibly valuable to society, it gives you a fuller perspective of the world. At its best, it can push people towards opposition to capitalism and realising that the system is flawed. It should be funded more, not less."

He connected the attack on culture to the broader crisis of capitalism and the diversion of resources towards war.

"All the wars currently going on are just symptoms of the system we are under: capitalism," he said. "War means the diversion of resources towards the corporations and the military-industrial complex. This is all linked to the defunding of art."

Victor argued that the defence of culture required a struggle against capitalism itself. He rejected the conception that the crisis could be resolved through parliamentary reforms, declaring: "Today's problems require the ending of capitalism. You cannot achieve this electorally or through reforms, but you can use elections to build a revolutionary movement."

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