

NEA and LRG Statement: Art and culture workers are essential to a fairer society



(3 May 2021) Arts and culture are amongst the sectors worst hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, pushing many workers from precarity to poverty and putting in jeopardy the future development of many cities.

Within the cultural and creative services, more than a third of all workers are self-employed or freelancers compared to 14% in total EU employment. Very often, minimum or living wages do not apply to this group, many workers made redundant have no alternative sources of revenues or sickness insurance, some countries rely increasingly on voluntary workers with even fewer rights, no training and no pay.

Cultural venues, cinemas, theatres, libraries remain shut to the public in many countries alongside cancellations of performances, festivals and exhibitions; many venues or cultural centres will be unable to recover on their own after months of lockdowns. However creative and useful online alternatives can be, they cannot replace live performances and bring in many challenges not least in terms of accessibility to public cultural services for all.

Strikes, protests and occupations of cultural centres or theatres have been taking place as in France, Spain, the UK, Belgium. The unions concerned demand first and foremost the safety of workers, maintenance of full pay and social protection for workers who cannot work, the defense of jobs; the extension of public sector collective agreements to workers by public authorities; the reopening of cultural venues based on an effective dialogue with the trade unions and in full respect of sanitary measures for the safety of workers and citizens.

In a joint statement last October, the cultural workers' branches of EPSU affiliates in France (CGT-Culture), Italy (FP-CGIL), and the UK (PCS) exposed how badly hit the art and cultural sector has been by the pandemic. The statement reaffirmed the prime role of public cultural policies and infrastructures in social and economic democracies and called upon the EU to ensure that culture is part of the recovery plans from the pandemic. It denounced austerity measures for the past decades that favoured cultural consumerism through privatisation and commercialisation of cultural services, to the detriment of a real cultural public service for all. In the three countries reductions in cultural national budgets have been three times higher than in other sectors. The disengagement of public authorities has translated into a decline of democratic access to arts, culture and heritage, weakening of workers' rights, a rise of precarious work, job losses and privatisations.

EPSU's sectors of central/federal, regional and local governments express their support for public art and culture workers and solidarity with the ongoing protests. Protection of workers and the fight against job losses remain the prime concerns of EPSU. Trade unions and works councils must be consulted on public authorities' plans to reopen cultural venues and centres with enough, free personal protective equipment, anti-bacterial gel and other sanitation measures as well as enough staffing levels and respect of physical distancing.

Arts and culture are not a commodity, they keep us standing, connected to the world, feed our imagination, carry hope for emancipation, give sense to solidarity and the exercise of our freedom and our humanity. They play an essential role in healing and responding to the trauma, mental health and isolation impacts of the pandemic. They will be critical to the recovery from the pandemic and co-creation of a fairer society.

Freedom of artistic expression and respect of cultural rights are a key component of European cultures. The resurgence of nationalism and religious, traditional conservative values are increasingly restricting and censoring art works and expressions on the ground of public morality. The targets are most often women, racialized and LGBTQ +artists. This is unacceptable and represents a danger to Europe's cultural diversity and democracy.

The economic dimension of culture is of paramount importance to many cities or even countries; in the UK the Arts Council found that, in normal times, every £1 invested in the arts returns £9 back to the economy. According to conservative estimates by Eurostat (which do not include workers who hold a second job in the sector), employment in cultural and art services amounts to 3.7% of total EU employment, with Estonia, Malta, Luxembourg, Finland, Slovenia, and the Netherlands well above the EU average.

This means that it is the future development of many cities, especially medium size cities, which since the 80s have made art and culture and tourism central to urban regeneration, which is at stake. Cities such as Venice, Avignon, Tallinn, Porto or Barcelona appear particularly exposed and will likely reverberate for many months if not years. Given the strong links between arts, culture, innovation and cross-border exchanges, it is the future of an open, democratic society which is at stake.

EPSU calls upon governments to:

- Enforce universal and equal access to cultural democracy based on the principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights according to which culture is for the many, not for the few;
- Invest in transformed and reinforced public cultural services and artistic creation, which are sustainable, free from political interference, and focused towards and with citizens, local communities and areas, with all their differences and potential for creativity;
- Ensure, in negotiations with social partners, stable, full-time employment and decent pay and working conditions with a view to stop precarious work, social dumping, privatisation and exploitation of employees, not least in outsourced companies;
- Consult trade unions and works councils on how best to organize the reopening of public cultural venues which guarantees the safety of workers and the public; compensation for workers who cannot exercise their right to work must ensure a decent living;
- With a view to mirror its economic weight in the economy, earmark at least 3% of the national recovery and resilience budget plans to culture and arts including additional recruitment in public cultural services; an additional 2% should be earmarked to the essential societal and democratic role of arts and culture in a post-COVID Europe.
- Change criteria/incentives to allocate public funds based on the work with local communities, citizens, schools as well as social services;
- Cooperate with other sectors to develop new forms of welfare services in the fields of education, mental and physical healthcare, environment, tourism, to make the contribution of culture and art to well-being and social cohesion more visible;
- Ensure that digital online formats accounting for public health objectives are a tool to enhance, not replace, live performances;

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