



## **Draft Manifesto for Cultural Workers** 13 April 2021 - by Zita Holbourne

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an extraordinary impact upon the arts and culture sector around the world, with disproportionately adverse impacts on the workers in this sector. Public employees who work in this sector often are furloughed and terminated as “non-essential” when elected leaders face declining revenues. These are workers who ensure that our public museums are maintained, our history is catalogued and studied, and our libraries are supported. This work is crucial to a thriving society and too often overlooked in an economic race to the bottom.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing discrimination against people of colour, women, and migrant workers in culture, who are amongst the first to be threatened with redundancy or furlough. Many self-employed cultural workers have found all of their work cancelled suddenly and dramatically for the foreseeable future. The public has discovered how much the absence of arts and culture has diminished the richness of our lives in a time of isolation.

The necessary closure of cultural centres and workplaces due to national and localised lockdowns, has directly impacted workers such as musicians, artists, actors, performers, film makers, education leaders, and socially and community engaged cultural workers, as well as the wider cultural workforce with whom they interact. The provision of cultural services is essential to humanity and plays a key role in pandemic recovery and healing, as well as communication about human rights, equality, justice and more. Arts and culture have the ability to bring people together, to break down barriers, to heal, to provide a platform for important debates; and to simply bring joy, entertainment and relaxation. The sector also benefits the economy greatly and is thus a key component for true economic recovery.

We need a zero Covid-19 strategy that takes us forward, that leaves nobody behind, that promotes and embraces equality and not a return to business as usual regarding political, economic, and cultural agency; whose voices are given a platform; and whose arts are embraced. The cultural sector, whilst multi-cultural in terms of engagement and participation, can also be guilty of institutional and systemic discrimination. Open and inclusive cultural services are vital to the future health of democracy in all communities and societies.

The crisis that the cultural sector now faces must be considered in the context of the impacts of over a decade of austerity with cuts devastating the sector and deepening discrimination. Whilst we need urgent action by governments to sustain the sector and ensure that all cultural workers, whatever their employment, receive the necessary economic and social support to survive the pandemic, we also need a forward-facing strategy of recovery, protection from further austerity measures with equality at its heart.

We object to the commodification of culture and the policing of borders limiting cultural engagements across communities. We reject the precarious treatment of workers in the sector and

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call for investment and access for all. Cultural workers cannot be the victims of a crisis created by budget cuts and ill-advised political choices. Our joint initiative must start from the protection of workers and the demand for job security.

Our demands and strategic aims for the future include:

- i. Expanding participation from every segment of our society to establish meaningful cultural democracy;
- ii. Establishing dignified working conditions, including the modification of contractual benefits and terms to end precarious and irregular work and provide decent pensions, sick pay, holiday pay, and union negotiation for self-employed cultural workers;
- iii. End exploitation of cultural workers through low and unequal pay; during this pandemic, we call for financial assistance for workers, including increased unemployment insurance, and assistance for essentials such as food and housing;
- iv. Establish recognition and collective bargaining agreements with cultural institutions employing cultural workers;
- v. Ensure the distribution of publicly funded pandemic recovery funds that are not dependent on or distributed by charity;
- vi. Establish secure funding for artists and cultural worker professional development and education plans;
- vii. Universalize employer accountability and maintain zero tolerance for discriminatory policies so that workers of all backgrounds feel welcome in this sector;
- viii. Expand trans-national work accessibility through the reduction of financially discriminatory labour policies, racist immigration policies, and paid visa requirements for cultural workers;
- ix. Invest in and engage with marginalised and poor communities having limited or no access to cultural events and activities
- x. Decolonizing the culture sector and mitigating the undue domination of Western art forms;
- xi. Creating legal structures to ensure the enforcement and protection of human rights of workers in the cultural sector; and
- xii. Focus on youth: the recruitment and retention of young trade unionists is vital in the fields of arts and culture; their creativity and growth are an investment for generations to come.

Cultural workers help us preserve the past, examine who we are, and imagine who we can become; they deserve to be recognized for their unique and critical contributions to society and to be treated with dignity in the workplace. Exceptional measures must be taken to repair the damage done by the pandemic in the cultural sector if we are to lift our society and build for a meaningful future.