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‘Lack of respect’: Art Gallery staff walk out over job losses



By [Linda Morris](#)

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Staff at the Art Gallery of NSW are set to walk out today in protest at the axing of 51 jobs, as budget figures reveal employee costs at the Powerhouse Museum are set to soar by 20 per cent at a time when the museum is mostly shut to the public.

Wednesday’s stop work is the first industrial action at the gallery in 10 years or more and comes after its director Maud Page [announced](#) a 10 per cent cut to the gallery’s 300 plus workforce in a restructure designed to save it \$7.5 million.

Some gallery departments are to be cut in half, down to three or four staff members. Others are to be merged: marketing now sits within content and digital technology, which staff say will make for inefficient operations.



The AGNSW and (right) a 2020 protest out the front of the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo.

Employees will rally from midday outside the 154-year-old gallery to draw public attention to the gallery's budget crisis hitting three years after the opening of its \$344 million contemporary art wing. The union says the axe falling on public facing roles, with only one manager targeted.

At the same time, budget papers reveal the Minns government authorised a \$10 million increase to the [staff budget for 2025-26](#) at the Powerhouse Museum on top of the record \$50.2 million it spent the previous year. The Powerhouse's projected [\\$60.6 million wages bill](#), now eclipses that of other cultural institutions, including the State Library of NSW which has been allocated \$39.2 million, Australian Museum (\$38.1m), Museums of History (\$47.7m) and even the Art Gallery of NSW (\$51m).

Yet, the Powerhouse's Ultimo campus is shuttered, its headquarters at Parramatta is not scheduled to open until later next year and its Castle Hill storehouse is open to the public on weekends. Sydney Observatory is open four days a week, six hours a day. *The Herald* counted more than 50 positions advertised internally in the Powerhouse staff bulletin since January. Work on the museum's two major construction projects worth more than \$1.2 billion are managed and primarily staffed by Infrastructure NSW, and construction giants, Lendlease and Richard Crookes.

"Our members are frustrated about the direction of the arts and culture portfolio across the state," Public Service Association assistant secretary Troy Wright said.

"The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences seems to be the black hole sucking all the funding and attention."

EDITOR'S PICK



Dozens of jobs to go as Art Gallery of NSW faces budget crisis

The gallery's budget crisis is a major test of the new leadership of Page, named five months ago as the gallery's first female director.

It also spotlights the Minns government's priorities to fund the [Powerhouse Museum's expansion](#) ahead of the March 2027 state election while enforcing budget restraint on all other major cultural institutions.

The state funding agency, [Create NSW, is also being gutted](#), with the loss of 24 staff including three senior executives.

The cuts to Create NSW amount to annual savings of about \$5 million, or \$20 million over the next four years, with only \$4 million of that so far announced to [western Sydney](#) as part of the government's three-year strategic plan. The Public Service Association, which represents staff at the gallery and the museum, has blamed the Powerhouse's runaway employee costs on management's push for consultants and external hires. Government says the extra staff funding is needed to build five major exhibitions for the Powerhouse Parramatta project.

"The continued use of consultants as art advisers and curators, the lack of respect or profile for the core business of the collection and the secrecy around the purpose of Ultimo have our members at that institution on tenterhooks," Wright said.

"Meanwhile the Art Gallery is cutting 50 plus jobs – disproportionately from lower paid grades – to make up for a \$12 million shortfall for which they cannot get a bailout, and Create NSW is also being sliced up, both seemingly because the MAAS project has all the funding."

Union members representing staff from other cultural institutions will join their colleagues at the protest, concerned their positions are also at risk.

The art gallery has extended the consultation period with staff by an additional two weeks due to the sheer amount of feedback. Some staff members have complained the director has still not been able to provide consistent and easily understood information in staff communications.

Page said she met with staff for four divisional meetings to outline the rationale for the proposed new structure.

"This is a profoundly challenging time for the gallery, especially for our dedicated colleagues who are impacted by the proposed structure."

Change was a normal part of any organisation's evolution, Arts minister John Graham said. "The Art Gallery is stable and focused, with a strong executive team committed to delivering its vision. I'm advised that the proposed organisational change reflects the Art Gallery's operational requirements, future programming and ambitions, its collections and audiences."