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Rank-And-File Reps in Prospect-BECTU Organising for Palestine and Against the British Far-Right

Over the past year, individual members of BECTU and Prospect (the two unions officially merged in 2017) have been finding one another in the Trade Union Bloc at the national demonstrations for Palestine. The union represents culture workers in museums, cinemas, theatres, galleries, film and television, alongside engineers, scientists, civil servants, and military defence staff. Many of the union's lay members and reps have sought to redress what they see as a lack in leadership from Prospect-BECTU (PB) officials when it comes to supporting Palestine.

Rank-and-file members who have been attending the protests were exhilarated by motions passed at conference this summer that, amongst other things, instructed the union's National Executive Committee to produce a policy committing the union to a boycott of companies operating in Israeli settlements. Since then, shared perspectives have become more apparent, and our communication with one another has improved.

When Britain was hit by a wave of fascist street violence in July, many rank-and-file Palestine protesters strongly felt our union ought to respond. We began naturally to organise from one issue to the other. However, as lay members and reps getting active in our union for the first time, we soon realised that navigating the union's rules and procedures can seem like climbing a mountain without a map.

For example, we found rules about bringing official union flags and banners to demos rather obscure and inconsistent. A few of us began to compare experiences and discovered sticking points. We learned that PB's leadership holds a position that anti-Tommy Robinson mobilisations, such as took place on 27th July, are not 'safe' enough for PB to endorse.

Following this experience, some rank-and-file reps approached their branches with a letter addressed to the union's leadership. A number of branch committees and union subcommittees signed their backing, urging the union leadership to 'actively and publicly support anti-fascist demonstrations supported by and/or organised with the TUC.' While the union leadership continues to share TUC statements about anti-fascism, its position vis-a-vis the demonstrations has not shifted yet.

We believe that the majority of members would support our union's affiliation with anti-fascist groups that actually mobilise against the far right, much as we believe they would support affiliation to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. We want the leadership to represent the views of our members. But the point is that such change requires a serious commitment to organising within the union, learning how it operates, and finding ways to engage as many members as possible in its work.

We have to politicise the trade union movement, organise with other people, gain knowledge and develop working class power. Rank-and-file organising within trade unions can be an effective vehicle through which to achieve these aims. We hope to go further in our efforts here.

Security Workers Strike at the Science Museum

Security guards across the Science Museum and Natural History Museum in South Kensington, London have successfully balloted for strike action, announcing strike days between 25-27 October and 30 October to 1 November. With 96% of members voting for strike action on a turnout of 95%, this is a considerable mobilisation of workers. For many this is both their first experience of industrial action, and their first time in a union. Organised through the United Voices of the World (UVW), the workers have put forward a comprehensive set of demands: £16/hour, pushing for more than the woeful offer of

£13.15/hour, alongside full sick pay from day one of employment and one more week of annual leave.

These dates have been chosen for maximum impact. High numbers of visitors will be planning to come see the museums during school half-term and over Halloween, so pickets on the always busy Exhibition Road will put security guards and their struggle front and centre to anyone passing through. Chatting regularly with a number of guards in the weeks before the ballot succeeded, the shared enthusiasm for action, and an eager recognition for what it might open up, was evident; "Of course, we are absolutely gonna do it".

Although the dispute is not centred on a demand for in-housing the workers into their respective museums, it's likely on the horizon. As we've seen recently with security guards at London's universities, the opportunity to transition from the insecurity of outsourced employment to the greater stability and benefits of in-house positions has been a powerful motivator for sustained and energetic campaigns.

The experience of the forthcoming strike may orient the workers toward this goal, and with the UJV's successes of securing NHS in-housing for workers at St Mary's Hospital back in 2021, a precedent for this type of campaign is well-established. An unintended consequence of the current outsourced employment structure is that it has allowed the UJV to establish a strong presence in three major museums—including the nearby V&A. The close proximity of these institutions within a historic museum and galleries district has created the potential for a highly concentrated group of organised workers, all united under a single company.

Many of these guards have been at the museums for decades, and while these workers enable the day-to-day running of the site and facilitate much of its commercial activity, they remain largely separated from the directly employed workers at the museums. Between the guards, facilities staff from Bidvest Noonan, and a range of workers from catering and events companies who flow through the museums for private events, major institutions like these have a highly fragmented workforce. The expected hierarchies of benefits and conditions structure the relations between us all, and the challenge of institution-wide organising is as present in the museums as it is in galleries and cultural venues across the country. Workers across the Science Museum Group were out on strike back in 2019, carrying out a 24-hour walkout to demand a decent living wage.

If we could gather energy for this self-evident demand back then, it shouldn't be too much to ask to extend it to our co-workers now. With workers in Prospect & PCS unions across these museums, the need for coordinated activity and consolidating meaningful

solidarity remains a necessity and extending the struggle and passion which security guards have so far demonstrated presents an important opportunity to assert ourselves once again. With fundraiser parties and picket lines organised, spaces for building relations between groups of workers are there for all to engage.

This is a chance to consolidate cross-union organising and discover new forms of solidarity, the foundation for any health labour movement. The second day of strike action is organised in parallel with anti-fascist mobilisation against Tommy Robinson on October 26th. A mass picket in front of the Science Museum will march to join a migrant workers' bloc at this crucial gathering, united in resisting the rise of fascist movements in the UK. The security guards have made the political conviction of their action clear in this way, helping to demonstrate the deep connection between disputes in the workplace and struggle against racism and fascism on the streets. It's up to the workers across the sector to reciprocate in whatever way they can. With the Science Museum calling the police on these guards for the plans to attend the anti-fascist march, doing so without any clear attempt to engage them about their concerns for safety and with no vocal protestation from the museum's unions about the obvious risk that this might present to the workers & picketers themselves, the necessity for sustained building of relations and solidarity between groups of workers is all the more vital. The type of activity which can best put pressure and amplify leverage on employers will require some collaboration and creativity - but that's what we are selling in the sector anyway, right?

Report on the Historic Strike at the National Museums of Liverpool

In February 2024, PCS union members at National Museums Liverpool began strike action over a cost-of-living payment. This strike grabbed headlines across the region, due to the scale of the dispute, with most of Liverpool's museums and galleries remaining closed throughout the action. Members stood for weeks and months in the cold, wind and rain of the Liverpool Waterfront, adamant that they would win this crucial payment.

At the start of this story, is an announcement from the Cabinet Office that civil servants will be receiving a £1,500 cost of living support payment to help cope with rising food costs, services and utility bills. This was won on the back of PCS's National Campaign of 22/23, which National Museums Liverpool members were an active part of.

This announcement, in June 2023, did not adequately address provisions for those not directly employed by the civil service. Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) and Non-

Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) were not in scope for extra funds to pay this crucial payment to staff.

PCS, along with Prospect, repeatedly raised the need for a non-consolidated payment to help address the cost-of-living crisis. The employer said they could not afford this without extra funding from our sponsor body, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. We implored them to find that funding from our sponsor body, but to no avail.

Discussions among members ensued in December, and a decision was taken to ballot on taking strike action over the issue. The ballot opened on the 3rd of January and ran until the end of the month. We had some lively debate within the branch, debating if we were taking the right course of action, but at the end of the day, the ballot box spoke for itself. 94% of members voted for strike action, with a 69% turnout.

Dates were set, and we agreed to go out for a solid block of eight weeks, as a show of strength to the employer. Even up until the eve of the action, we tried to get a deal done with National Museums Liverpool, but nothing could be agreed.

The first few picket lines were incredible, with around seventy people on the first picket line. What struck us, and certainly the employer, was the vibrancy of the action. Members of our Branch Executive Committee work in our Learning and Participation department, so they certainly know how to make something entertaining! We were so emboldened and pleased that the picket numbers was higher than we anticipated. We were still getting fifty and above on the second and third weekend of the action, which is a testament to the passion and togetherness that we have as a branch.

The first offer came to us a few weeks into the action. We were quite honest in our reactions to the offer, especially in interviews we were doing with the BBC and local radio. We labelled the offer of £250 (pro-rata) as "derisory", and members certainly agreed. The rejection was overwhelming.

With the first offer rejected, we turned our attention to ramping up the pressure on NML. We spoke to as many media outlets as we could, drawing attention to our cause, but also to the cause of culture in general.

A further offer of £750 was made, but this also didn't meet the demands of our members, who were clear in what it would take for them to suspend action. The offer was rejected.

After the eight weeks were over, a new strategy had to be devised. Another block of action wasn't feasible, so we had to be tactical. After lengthy discussion, we decided that every weekend would be the most disruptive to operations at NML, as the front of house

teams are shorter staffed. We booked in a block of a dozen weekends for further strike action.

This seemed to have some affect, as those working through the strike to cover those on the picket line were now becoming tired and exhausted with rest-day changes.

Just before the May half term holidays, an offer was put to PCS that would mean that we had to suspend strike action while we balloted, unless it was off the table. The offer was, in totality, what we had been asking for. Not all at once but did meet the conditions if members of staff were in post this time next year. We balloted members over the decision for a week and raised the threshold for a yes vote from 50% to 65%. This was a very contentious move, with a lot of people unhappy with the suspension of the action while we balloted.

The ballot reached its conclusion, and we had a 65% yes vote. The dispute was over. Members finally had the cost-of-living payment that they had campaigned so tirelessly for, and demonstrated the power that collective action has on the material conditions of workers in this country.

Finally, there's one thing that particularly warmed my heart during the strike was the support we had from the people of Liverpool. Their solidarity, generosity and kindness to our cause warmed us up while we froze on the pickets. It showed that when people stand together and take action, we can mobilise and achieve our needs and aims.

Update from Fossil Free Books

Fossil Free Books (FFB) is a collective of workers organising in the books industry. FFB was formed after Greta Thunberg's refusal to appear at the 2023 Edinburgh International Book Festival (EIBF) over its sponsorship deal with asset manager Baillie Gifford (BG). FFB believes that a fossil-free, genocide-free books industry is possible. The group is open to anyone whose labour contributes to writing, translating, illustrating, making, distributing or selling books, as well as to book-related media and events.

Earlier this year, FFB released an open letter, signed by over 800 writers and books industry workers, calling on EIBF and other book festivals to leverage their relationships with Baillie Gifford to urge the asset manager to divest from fossil fuels and from Israeli genocide, occupation and apartheid.

After Hay and EIBF reluctantly cut ties with BG, the firm hastily withdrew sponsorship of all other UK book festivals. As they did so, several festivals and BG directors made a series of misleading accusations against FFB, paving the way for a wave of vitriol across social and legacy media outlets. The announcement

from EIBF, in particular, sparked significant backlash, especially from high-profile industry members, and was characterised by targeted harassment of individual signatories. In response, FFB has provided support to affected individuals, including free mental health support sessions, and is also organising alternative book events and a newly established mutual aid fund.

At the same time, several FFB members wrote pieces in national papers and magazines to express their disappointment at BG's decision to simply cut ties with festivals instead of engaging with workers' demands, and also noted that messaging from some of the festivals was anything but conducive to achieving a satisfactory resolution based on constructive dialogue. More pleasing, however, was the response from some of the larger publishers who, following calls from book workers both publicly and privately, moved to fill some of the gap in funding left by BG's sudden withdrawal.

FFB has also been hard at work investigating alternative forms of labour organising. This follows the disappointing EGM held by the Society of Authors (SoA) in May, at which an FFB resolution on industry divestment from fossil fuels passed but an FFB resolution on releasing a statement in support of peers and colleagues in Gaza and Palestine failed to pass, after the SoA opposed this resolution. Many who attended the EGM (both FFB members and non-members) felt that voting on this resolution, in particular, was grossly mishandled by the SoA. The SoA has so far refused to engage with FFB on implementation of the fossil fuels resolution. Instead, it recently published its response to the extensive feedback submitted by members in the aftermath of the EGM. FFB will review this information in due course and present its own response if appropriate.

Following a significant uptick in workers organising with FFB following the EGM, a dedicated working group set about discussing next steps for book workers. The three scenarios this group has been primarily focused on are 1) Stay with the SoA and try to achieve reform from within; 2) Leave the SoA as a collective and join a different trade union; or 3) Set up a new trade union for all book industry workers. FFB is still an informal organisation and so a survey was conducted to map current membership. The two key findings from this were that several members no longer felt safe within the SoA, with its handling of the Gaza resolution the latest in a long line of divisive behaviours; and that a significant proportion of members feel that the SoA does not act as a trade union, despite its assertions to the contrary.

The full results of the survey informed the working group's subsequent activities. While there is significant appetite for a new union, following advice from experienced labour organisers, it was decided that this is not feasible with FFB's current resources

- though it may be an option further down the line. An assessment matrix was drawn up to compare the different trade union options which was then presented to the wider group. Alongside this, work has been underway to establish in more concrete terms how FFB makes decisions as a collective. The working group is now moving forward with a future scenarios analysis in order that an informed decision can be taken regarding how book workers can best organise moving forwards.

Upcoming Dates

Natural History and Science Museum workers, who are employed by the external contractor Wilson James, will be on strike:

Friday	25 October (from 18:30)
Saturday	26 October
Sunday	27 October
Wednesday	30 October (from 18:30)
Thursday	31 October
Friday	1 November

Main picket is at Exhibition Road
Nearest Tube: Kensington



Artists + Culture Workers LDN

**Nov 4th, 7:45 - 9:15,
Pelican House/Online**

**Meeting to discuss workplace
organising and political campaigns
in the culture sector, open to all
artists and culture workers**

Registration:

