
Protesting the skinny budget: Union actors and musicians fight Trump's attacks on the arts

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If President Donald Trump is serious about creating jobs in the nation's heartland then he needs to rethink his own proposal to eliminate federal funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the agency that helps fund the not-for-profit groups behind thousands of the theater and music productions seen every year in middle America.

That's the analysis of leaders of the labor unions Actors' Equity and American Federation of Musicians, two organizations that could see employment among their members crippled if the cuts in Trump's so-called "[skinny budget](#)" are enacted into law. The current NEA annual budget of \$148 million is small but important, they say.

Mary McColl, executive director of Actors' Equity, which represents more than 50,000 stage actors and stage managers, says that most members work in non-profit organizations, outside of the commercial entertainment capitals of New York and Los Angeles. They don't rely exclusively on NEA funding for their paychecks, she says, but the NEA is critical in the mix of public and private funding that keeps live theater performances coming year after year in the country's smaller cities.

"The NEA is like a stamp of approval," McColl explains.

NEA grants allow a typical theater troupe to get matching funds from state or city governments, corporations and philanthropists, according to McColl. In this way, NEA funds act as "seed money" that is crucial in sustaining theater groups in small cities where the local economy is too weak to provide full support.

Small cities and towns will be hit the hardest by Trump's proposed defunding of the NEA, McColl says.

"This is an unbelievably reckless and irresponsible idea from someone who wrote *The Art of the Deal*. The president says he wants to create jobs—he can start by protecting our nation's investment in middle class art jobs," she says.

The argument in favor of NEA funding as a sustainer of jobs in middle America was similarly articulated last month in Washington, D.C., by Actors' Equity President Kate Shindle, a former Miss America beauty queen and self-described Republican.

"There is so much irrefutable evidence that the arts serve as an economic engine, even and especially in cities and towns whose factories or industry jobs have disappeared. All together, the arts are a \$700 billion industry employing directly 4.7 million Americans and millions more indirectly," she [told](#) a press conference March 16.

Shindle's press conference was unusual. The union is generally "quiet" on political and social issues, McColl says, "But we are far less quiet (now) than we have ever been before ... Our members are looking to us to step out," in the face of this new attack.

Ray Hair, president of the 80,000-member American Federation of Musicians (AFM), tells *In These Times* that "the damage would be irreparable," if Trump's proposals go through.

The membership of AFM mirrors that of Actors' Equity in the sense that many work for non-profit organizations where NEA grants provide the keystone in a broader funding mix. Hair says there are at least 200 symphony orchestras spread around the country that would be seriously endangered by defunding the NEA.

In addition, union musicians perform at theater productions and at local festivals that are often the premier arts events in smaller cities. These events are valued stimulants to the local economy and help maintain a source of steady employment for professional musicians.

Hair also says his members are similar to those of Actors' Equity in the sense that

nearly 100 percent of them have worked for non-profits linked to NEA funding at some point in their careers.

“Any professional musician who has been in this business for a while will have performed in a venue that has been supported by NEA,” he says. “The NEA doesn’t support their careers directly, but, in a sense, it makes them possible.”

It’s against the rules for NEA staff to lobby for the agency’s own budget, agency spokeswoman Victoria Hutter tells *In These Times*, but NEA believes that its funding is important in supporting local jobs. The agency has been working closely with the Commerce Department’s Bureau of Economic Analysis to compile [data](#). The figures compiled thus far are not specific enough to precisely estimate the jobs impact of withdrawing funding from NEA, Hutter says, but clearly there would be an impact.

Trump’s defunding proposals aimed at the arts are not confined to the NEA. They also extend to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the federal Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The AFL-CIO’s Department of Professional Employees (DPE) is coordinating a coalition of unions to fight the proposals for all three agencies. In a press release, DPE president Paul Almeida stated: “Our unions’ members include actors, musicians, stagehands, and many other professional in diverse communities in all 50 states. Trump’s proposed cuts to the NEA, NEH, and CPB will hurt many of these hard-working Americans and we are united in our effort to ensure Congress preserve federal arts funding.”

The coalition includes 10 unions in addition to Actors’ Equity and AFM: American Guild of Musical Artists, American Guild of Variety Artists, Directors Guild of America, Guild of Italian American Actors, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), Stage Directors and Choreographers Society and Writers Guild of America.

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