

Croatia: Cultural Sector Workers Want a Fair Deal

Outside of Negotiations and Agreements

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Employees in the independent cultural sector remain outside the framework of agreements made by workers employed in public institutions who negotiate with authorities at the margins of interest of large public unions. Dina Gligo, SKUPA union: “Although we don’t have a common employer, our working relationships and tasks, and the obligations arising from them, are determined by the state through its propositions and grants, which could be qualified as the ultimate employer given that it outsources society’s public needs to civil society organisations.”

A coalition of eleven public service unions this morning rejected the Government’s offer of a pay increase, weeks after an agreement was reached with state service unions. Among the unions that did not sign the basic collective agreement with the authorities is the Croatian Union of Cultural Workers (HSDK), which looks after the rights of cultural workers employed within institutions founded by the city or state, from national theatres to regional museums and archives and everything in between.

In a conversation days before the situation unfolded, the General Secretary of the Croatian Union of Cultural Workers, Domagoj Rebić, confirmed to H-Alter the coordination with other public service unions, saying that he assessed what was offered as the maximum that could be extracted at this moment, and that the union cannot tip the balance due to significantly smaller membership compared to other public unions.

Domagoj Rebić “At the state level, we have about 2,000 employees in cultural systems funded from state budgets. When we compare such membership with the unions of educators, medical staff and their employees, we are quantitatively a small union, but since we represent the cultural sector as such, we have completely equal status in collective bargaining. We take into account our numbers and understand that we are too small numerically compared to other unions. That’s why we’ve always moved in the direction of agreement, fitting in with the majority. We cannot, with our 2,000 employees, dictate the pace to sectors that have, for example, 150,000 members in the employee system,” the unionist said at the time.

Employees in the independent cultural sector remain outside the framework of agreements of cultural workers employed in public institutions, who negotiate with the authorities at the margin of interests of large public unions. Workers who produce all the force of artistic and cultural production outside the institutional framework - admittedly, concentrated mainly in large urban centres - remain, therefore, outside these negotiations. The negotiating position from which one can threaten a strike, as can, for example, everyone from cleaners to lead actors of certain national theatres covered in these agreements, practically does not exist for independents.

The unequal union representation of independent cultural workers compared to those employed in cultural institutions has its historical background, writes Jaka Primorac in the publication "From Project to Project: Work and Employment in the Cultural Sector" from 2022. The author notes that the market approach and project work have roots in the 1970s, in socialist Croatia therefore, when the difference "between institutionally and project-employed cultural workers and artists" was profiled.

Asked whether, in the coming year, there is a threat of an increasing deepening of differences between cultural workers employed in institutions in relation to labour rights in the independent cultural sector, Dina Gligo, visual artist and founder of the Trade Union Collective of United Precarious Workers and Activists - SKUPA, tells H-Alter that the state of labour rights in independent culture in Croatia could hardly be worse anyway.

Dina Gligo "Artistic work is not valued as work at all, and independent cultural workers in non-profit civil society organisations can barely exercise their legally prescribed labour rights in practice. Our possibilities are in many ways unregulated while our obligations are hyperregulated," Gligo tells us.

Furthermore, the unionist warns that artists outside official cultural institutions do not have guaranteed basic labour rights: "Due to the dispersion of their statuses - independent artists, self-employed artists, freelancers or employed, but largely precarious cultural workers - they have no collective agreement; in visual arts, which about half of artists engage in, we don't even have a price list comparable to a base that could be at least symbolically negotiated (although in other areas there are price lists, as well as the valuable document Code of Practice of the Za K.R.U.H. initiative and the important process of the Forum for Fair Practices ZKN); we have no Christmas bonuses, awards or per diems, we have no beneficial years of service nor assured costs of sick leave from the first day or almost any recognised professional illnesses. The per diems of independent artists and cultural workers are taxable although our second income is not second but the only and main source of income, and travel is the exclusive way to do our job."

Dina Gligo: Our possibilities are in many ways unregulated while our obligations are hyperregulated In cooperation with civil society organisations and unions, the SKUPA Union, in which Gligo works, conducted research in 2023 entitled "Experiences and Working Conditions in the Non-profit Sector", which showed on a sample of 1,075 workers that cultural workers from the non-profit sector work for below-average wages. Also, work at night and on weekends is largely normalised, while work during legally prescribed rest times such as free time, sick leave or annual leave, presents an additional problem. In a situation where some artists are grossly underpaid for their work and lack quality representation and a corresponding negotiating lever before relevant ministries and institutions, our interlocutor sees the need for alliances as crucial, and moreover, as the only way out towards better working conditions for cultural workers.

"I understand that HSDK may not prioritise the inclusion of independent cultural workers - because employed artists face a major struggle for competitive working conditions, and on the other hand, independent workers are, due to undeveloped legislation, dispersedly linked to various crafts, associations, artistic organisations and professional associations, many of which lack the capacity or interest to actively engage in advocacy. However, although we don't have a common employer, our working relationships and tasks and the obligations arising from them are determined by the state through its propositions and grants, which could qualify as the ultimate employer given that it outsources the public needs of society it represents to civil society organisations," Gligo emphasises.

Domagoj Rebić: We cannot, with our 2,000 employees, dictate the pace to sectors that have, for example, 150,000 members When asked about the possibility of joint appearances of the trade union

association of cultural workers in institutions with independents, unionist Rebić responds that there have been attempts at conversations around creating a common price list, although he does not specify which groups he is referring to exactly. However, he says that work on this issue has not been successful. "Our doors are absolutely open, we as a union of cultural workers have a very open cooperation with the Croatian Association of Orchestral and Chamber Artists, associations of ballet and drama artists. When there was a problem with the theatre law, we went into coordinated actions, wrote letters to the ministry, announced protests and made media appearances. We are open in every sense to cooperation," Rebić concludes.

As examples of consolidation and gathering that have yielded more concrete results, even of an analytical nature, Gligo highlights the activities of individual unions, action groups, coalitions, but also clusters such as the one formed for the process of adopting the Law on Artists, halted on several occasions. "In any case, I believe that the entire sector should unite and that greater rights for some should not result in fewer rights for others; quite the opposite - we all want better rights for all workers, including artists and cultural workers regardless of their employment status," adds the founder of SKUPA.

New Year ahead of the independent sector

In 2025, emphasises Dina Gligo, we enter for the thirteenth time without the announced Law on Performing Artistic Activities and Encouraging Artistic Creation, problems of lack of criteria and lack of transparency in the allocation of funds for the implementation of public needs programmes in culture of the Republic of Croatia, which have just at the end of 2024 resulted in cataclysmic results of public funding for organisations, which "without any explanation completely rejected the allocation of support for long-standing non-commercial contemporary art programmes, and for most complex and year-round programmes, symbolic amounts were allocated that can barely cover the minimum student hourly rate".

"The propositions of public funding for 2025 still have not introduced control or the obligation of adequate payment for artistic work proportional to the purchasing power and sector of the organiser, which they could implement in their tenders without any legal frameworks, and which would ensure appropriate fees and salaries for artistic and cultural work and proportionate degrowth of cultural programmes and further professionalisation of contemporary artistic productions. We don't have a list of valued exhibition spaces that would be determined according to clear criteria but also class opportunities to encourage decentralisation of cultural production. Project grants were paid directly to artists, which in some places are treated entirely as income for tax purposes (although they are not, and can change the tax bracket of the project holder), and we are not provided with incentive conditions for market participation - we have no motivating reliefs for purchasing artworks or the possibility of distance selling. Finally, our copyright jobs are still not recorded in our area of work according to the National Classification of Occupations nor are they interesting to the statistics of the State Bureau of Statistics, which is a shame, because with the recognition of artistic work as work, we would have a better overview of the actual situation on the ground and a vision of the necessary future," explains Dina Gligo the frameworks that await independent cultural workers in the coming year.

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