



Pandora Vaughan's banner for AUE is shown on the right, on a march in support of a Free Palestine, 2025.

From Hand to Mouth to Bread and Roses

Artist and founding member of Artists' Union England Katriona Beales examines the harsh economic realities facing artists in England today, drawing on survey data that reveals 79% of union members cannot survive on their art practice alone, and explores the ideological battles surrounding artists' efforts to organize collectively

By Katriona Beales

From Hand to Mouth to Bread and Roses (2025) is the title of a recent report by artist-activist collective Industria, commissioned by Artists' Union England (AUE), that illuminates the stark realities of trying to practice as an artist in England, UK. The report analyses the key findings of AUE's latest membership survey and builds the case for why it is important for artists to unionise. Here I give a brief introduction to AUE, and then to the report, examining some of the key findings.

As I write in the foreword, "Artists' Union England started as a pipe dream; a dream born out of intense frustration from years of direct, lived experiences of dire working conditions as artists." Three of us, Angela Kennedy, Sally Sheinman and myself, met whilst on an artist advisory board to an arts organisation who consistently undermined, ignored, and then belittled us. As damaging as this experience was, it was the impetus for the 3 of us to start a conversation in 2012 exploring the possibility of setting up a trade union for artists. We grew to 10 artists who

formed the first National Executive Committee and launched AUE on May 1, 2014¹. Since 2016, AUE has been an active member of the TUC (Trades Union Congress). We have a growing national membership, which now numbers over 2,200 of us. Whilst still very much at the smaller end of the spectrum of trade unions, we are now not far off the membership of some of our much longer established sister unions such as the Writers Guild of Great Britain (est 1959). Our current rate of membership growth has us at around 3,000 members by July next year.

The straightforward summary above, belies the years of mostly voluntary work that many members of AUE put in to get the union off the ground, glossing over what has felt at points like an insurmountable mountain to climb. I say this not to romanticise or glamourise 'struggle' (as it is profoundly unglamorous) but to expose certain realities that sometimes get lost, obscuring the uncertainty that those organising often experience. We feel our way along uncertain paths towards an unstable outcome, making mistakes and asking ourselves, is this even possible? Are we getting anywhere? Will this work? And ultimately is it worth it? Any trajectory from hand to mouth, to not just bread but roses too, will continue to involve the hard work of a myriad of on-going, often small decisions to build relationships, consensus and collective power.

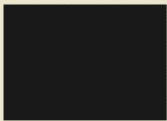
As such *From Hand to Mouth to Bread and Roses* marks a key point in the history and development of AUE. We are now at a scale where a membership survey can produce meaningful data for us to lobby and organise around. We have the collective resources to commission a report from Industria, one of the most important activist artist collectives currently working in the UK.² We now have a membership large enough that our collective dues can support a small freelance staff team. Significantly, earlier this year, we appointed our first dedicated caseworker.

As I mentioned at the beginning, *From Hand to Mouth to Bread and Roses* functions as both an analysis of Artists' Union England's 2024 membership survey findings, as well as a tool for organising. The report presents a case for why artists need a union (a case we will continue to make and remake in the face of ongoing ideological opposition—more on this later). In the title Industria combine two quotes. The first part is taken from one of our member's survey responses, which summarised artists' precarity in the context of a depleted welfare state as "We work hand to mouth with no safety net." Collectively, many, if not all, AUE members have experienced the impact of the structural and ideological decisions that have been made by successful UK governments (thankfully our celebrated National Health Service has survived—just). One of our most important union artifacts, a banner designed by artist Pandora Vaughan, was made specifically for AUE's participation in the 2015 Anti-Austerity Assembly, responding to David Cameron's coalition government's devastating cuts (see image showing members carrying it on a recent march for a Free Palestine). For those of us involved in the early days, establishing the union was part of the liberatory activity of choosing not to fall under the spell of what the late theorist Mark Fisher terms "Capitalist Realism". The second quote is from James Oppenheimer, who in 1911 drew inspiration from the American women's suffrage activist

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•  an inquiry into artists' pay and conditions in the public sector in response to the Artist Leaks data

• 

•  **industria**

From a report by artist-activist collective Industria on working conditions for artists

Helen Todd, and wrote at the beginning of the last century “Yes, bread we fight for—but we fight for Roses, too”. As a union we identify with this historical trade union rallying cry. We are not just fighting for necessities such as food and housing but also for the supposed ‘luxury’ of a cultural life and expression for all.

Key Findings: *From Hand to Mouth to Bread and Roses*

Exactly how difficult it is to function as an artist in England is laid bare through the report’s analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data generated by AUE’s 2024 membership survey. It makes for painful reading in many ways, illustrating how crippling endemic low pay is for many artists.

- 79% of AUE members responding to the membership survey said that they did not earn enough from their art practice to live on, with most members having to take on additional jobs. Over half of artist respondents earned under £15,000

annually from all types of work; 72% earned less than £20,000, and 96.4% earned below the UK median wage. Industria describe the data as showing that the AUE membership is made up of artists “at the sharp end of capitalism”.

The report lays out how systemic low pay intersects for artists with other crises, particularly the lack of affordable housing and of pension savings.

Positively, however, AUE membership is more diverse than the wider sector, suggesting that those facing discrimination and structural inequalities are more likely to unionise in the face of systemic oppressions.

Of the AUE members responding to the membership survey:

- 66.5% identified as female and of those 70.5% have caring responsibilities.
- 6% identified as non-binary and 4% identified as trans.
- 53.4% identified themselves as working class.
- 21.4% indicated they were from the Global Majority (compare with data from the 2016 Arts Council England Livelihoods of Visual Artists Survey suggesting that 6.5% of artists are ‘BAME’).

- 36.4% indicated that they were disabled (compared with 24% of the wider working-age population).

Low wages, combined with systemic inequalities, the cumulative effects of deep cuts to the welfare state and to arts budgets, which in turn mesh with housing inequalities and the cost-of-living crisis, creating stacked crises that deeply affect artists alongside many other low-paid workers.



Despite the need for a union that our growing membership demonstrates, AUE consistently faces arguments against artists' unionising.

These primarily seem to come from two quite distinct quarters. One from neo-liberal individualised artists and creatives who fundamentally do not understand solidarity and see it at odds with succeeding in a highly

competitive sector. Those of us interested in unionising as artists value solidarity as a mechanism for resisting the politics of scarcity and instead focus on the way that solidarities offer collective space to create ecologies of abundance. These ecologies are not primarily about capital, but about kinship.

Another quarter with ideological arguments against artists' unionising comes from some academics who understand this effort as an attempt by the PMC (professional middle class) to infiltrate, colonise and corrupt the workers movement. These arguments ignore the fact that **working class artists have and continue to take the lead in driving artists' and cultural workers' unions forward**, see Angela Kennedy's 2018 account of the formation of Artists' Union England. Industria respond to this important critique in the report, and I think it is worth quoting them at length:

"Artists are often described socioeconomically as 'modern professionals', along with teachers, lecturers and police officers (at sergeant level and above). This categorisation is also made by Arts Council England in their equalities monitoring forms, placing precarious freelancers alongside public sector employees, and implying that artists are middle class by default. As we will see, the median artist and AUE member earns under £15,000 a year from all types of work, revealing this categorisation to be an oversimplification based on assumptions about education and income that don't neatly stack up against contemporary reality. AUE members clearly strongly identify with being working class. Considering both the cold reality of the low wages that characterise most artists' lives and the historic aims of the labour movement to advance working class struggle, it is unsurprising that such a broad section of the membership

of a union for artists aligns themselves with this class position. Whilst some theorists continue to balk at artists being categorised as workers, or indeed working class, we think it is most productive to understand both of these categorisations as a statement of solidarity and intent. In the context of unionising and organising as artists, instead of drawing clear boundaries around a 'pre-existing empirical group classified as "the working class"', as Gavin Mueller puts it, we can instead 'look for the struggles themselves: the actual things that people are doing [...] to compose and organise themselves in struggle.' This reading of 'class struggle' allows us to swerve more authentocratic distinctions between the working and middle classes and build a collective of AUE members as class comrades against a society and art system that keeps the overlapping artist precariat and working classes unstable and disenfranchised." p.34

The scale of the challenges we face both within and without, demand new types of coalitions of purpose, including building solidarities across class divides. Unionising as artists is to not just *dream* about other art worlds but instead to purposefully attempt to enact these worlds. Here, art is not a luxury commodity, but a set of possibilities open to all. It is in the space of the union, where 'I' is changed to 'We', that together we can take back power and redefine the terms under which we work, are paid, and must live.

* Photo: Steve Eason

Footnote

¹ There was a previous attempt to form an Artists' Union in England in the 1970s led by artists like Mary Kelly and Gustav Metzger. Other creative sectors have a much longer history of unionisation.

² Musician Union was established in 1893 and Equity in 1930.

Key Links

Read the full report From Hand to Mouth to Bread and Roses (<https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/from-hand-to-mouth-to-bread-and-roses>)

Artists' Union England (<http://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/>)

Industria (<http://www.we-industria.org/>)

References

Fisher, Mark. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.

Kennedy, A. (2018) *Artists' Union England—a new trade union*, CAMEo Cuts no. 8, CAMEo Research Institute for Cultural and Media Economies, University of Leicester, June 2018

Oppenheim, J. (1915) Bread and Roses (<https://www.marxists.org/subject/women/poetry/bread.html>) read here:

Livelihoods of Visual Artists 2016 Data Report (about:blank) (pub 2018) by TBR, commissioned by Arts Council England

Katriona Beales (<http://www.katrionabeales.com/>) is an artist based in London. Selected commissions include FACT, Liverpool (2015); the V&A and Science Gallery London (both 2018); IMPAKT, Netherlands (2020–21) and Sotheby's Institute of Art (2023). Katriona is one of three founding

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Artists' Union England (AUE) (<http://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/>) is the trade union for visual, applied and socially engaged artists based in England. Formed in 2014, AUE joined the TUC in 2016. It launched with 10 artists and now numbers over 2,200.

📅 OCTOBER 1, 2025([HTTPS://LABORARTREVIEW.NET/2025/10/01/](https://laborartreview.net/2025/10/01/))

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