

More than 100 bands, musicians boycott SXSW festival to protest US Army and military contractor sponsorships

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More than 100 music acts and individual musicians dropped out of the popular South by Southwest (SXSW) arts festival this year in Austin, Texas to protest the event's sponsorship by the US Army and major defense contractors.

A report in *The Hill* indicated that as of March 13, “five music labels and 105 bands and individual musicians, including more than 60 acts from the United Kingdom and all 12 Irish bands originally slated to perform, chose to forego the nine-day festival” in opposition to “the Pentagon’s support for Israel’s war in Gaza.”

The SXSW event, held March 8-16 this year, is a coming together of film, music and technology coinciding annually with the spring break at the University of Texas at Austin. The music festival is the largest of its kind globally with approximately 1,500 acts participating and over 300,000 people expected to attend the 38th edition this year.

The artists boycotting the SXSW festival were responding in part to a campaign mounted by the Austin For Palestine Coalition (AFPC) launched on February 21 called “No Warmongers at SXSW 2024.” The AFPC campaign pointed to the presence of substantial sponsorship funding at SXSW by the US Army and military contractors Raytheon (RTX), its subsidiary Collins Aerospace, and BAE Systems.

The bands and musicians to withdraw from the event include Chicago-based songwriter Ella Williams, known as Squirrel Flower, Los Angeles-based indie band Mamalarky, Eliza McLamb from North Carolina and hip hop trio Kneecap from Belfast, Northern Ireland.

The record label Flatspot Records issued a statement

via Twitter/X saying it was removing its official showcase from SXSW and adding, “We will not support the involvement of the U.S. Army and defense companies at SXSW.”

Among the Irish artists who withdrew were all the groups scheduled to appear in official showcases at SXSW, including Sprints, Kneecap, NewDad and Chalk. On March 10, the acclaimed trio Kneecap announced their plan to cancel, explaining their decision was taken to “highlight the unacceptable deep links the festival has to weapons companies and the US military who at this very moment are enabling a genocide and famine against a trapped population.”

The Kneecap statement went on to say, “We cannot in good conscience attend an arts festival that has ‘The US Army’ as a ‘Super Sponsor’ and is platforming RTX (formerly Raytheon), Collins Aerospace, and BAE Systems, the very companies selling the weapons that have murdered 31,000 Palestinians, over 21,000 of them women and children.”

Adam O'Regan, guitarist for Irish band Soda Blonde, told *Newstalk* that it had been a “big deal” for the band to be accepted by SXSW, but that its members quickly decided to boycott the event.

A few short days actually before flying off, we learned about some of the partnerships [with the military and military contractors] that we just kind of felt conflicted with our core principles and values ... And, you know, we met up and we discussed at length for about four hours—what it would look like to go and what it would look like to not go.

Ultimately, for us, [we] just came to the decision that, you know, we just couldn't in good conscience go and stand on a stage and perform knowing that there are profiteers for, you know, in the tents next door, as it were. ...

We're under no illusion that what our decision was gonna do was going to influence the U.S. Army or the culture in America necessarily, but, as I say, for us personally, it felt like the only decision we could make.

According to an analysis by the American Friends Service Committee, the US military contractors present at SXSW provide the following weaponry to the Israel Defense Forces in the murderous assault on Gaza:

RTX (formerly Raytheon) and Collins Aerospace: "The world's second largest weapons manufacturer and largest producer of guided missiles, RTX supplies the Israeli Air Force with guided air-to-surface missiles for its F-16 fighter jets, as well as cluster bombs and bunker busters, which have consistently been used against Gaza's civilian population and infrastructure."

BAE Systems: "The world's seventh largest weapons manufacturer, UK company BAE Systems manufactures the M109 howitzer, a 155mm mobile artillery system that the Israeli military has been using extensively, firing tens of thousands of 155mm shells into the Gaza Strip. Some of these shells are white phosphorus bombs, the use of which is forbidden in densely populated civilian areas and potentially amounts to a war crime. BAE also manufactures electronic missile launching kits and other components for Israel's F-15, F-16, and F-35 fighter jets, which the Israeli Air Force has used extensively in all of its attacks on Gaza, including in 2023."

A complete list of the artists who have joined the boycott can be reviewed on the Instagram post below: https://www.instagram.com/p/C4bDNtagkUw/?utm_so

urce=ig_web_button_share_sheet

Reacting in a predictable manner, fascist Republican governor of Texas Greg Abbott posted on social media, "Bands pull out of SXSW over U.S. Army sponsorship. Bye. Don't come back. Austin remains the HQ for the Army Futures Command. San Antonio is Military City USA. We are proud of the U.S. military in Texas. If you don't like it, don't come here."

In an effort at damage control, SXSW organizers responded on social media that it did "not agree with Governor Abbott." The festival group claimed they "fully respect the decision these artists made to exercise their right to free speech," and then defended the US Army and the military contractor festival sponsorships.

The SXSW organizers absurdly attempted to present the participation of the American military and its contractors—who have vast quantities of blood on their hands for decades of imperialist violence in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa—as a progressive contribution to contemporary life: "The Army's sponsorship is part of our commitment to bring forward ideas that shape our world. In regard to Collins Aerospace, they participated this year as a sponsor of two SXSW Pitch categories, giving entrepreneurs visibility and funding for potentially game-changing work."

The musicians' decision to boycott SXSW, which means passing up an opportunity to gain significant exposure, and to stand up against the genocide in Gaza is admirable and sets an example for other musicians and artists.

The barbaric imperialist slaughter in Gaza and the threat of nuclear world war can and must be stopped. It will not be stopped, however, by pressuring corporations and the Biden administration, which are entirely impervious to such opposition. Artists and musicians should direct their determination to fight these crimes toward the only social force capable of putting an end to them once and for all: the international working class in the struggle for socialism.



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