

Trump's tariff on foreign films: An authoritarian attack on culture and the working class

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On May 4, Donald Trump announced a reactionary escalation in his administration's war on culture and the working class: a plan to impose a 100 percent tariff on all films imported into the United States. Trump declared, "The Movie Industry in America is DYING a very fast death... This is a concerted effort by other Nations and, therefore, a National Security threat," presenting the policy as a response to foreign interference.

He authorized Jamieson Greer, the United States Trade Representative, to begin the process of taxing "any and all Movies coming into our Country that are produced in Foreign Lands," vowing to resurrect domestic film production and restore it to its "former greatness."

Far from protecting the creative and productive forces of the entertainment sector, Trump's plan is designed to safeguard the profits of the US entertainment monopolies—media conglomerates that already dominate the global industry.

The globalized nature of film and television production mirrors that of all modern manufacturing industries. While most films shown in American theaters are indeed US-produced, Hollywood has long relied on cheaper foreign locations for filming, post-production, music recording and other processes. Trump's tariffs cannot do anything to reverse this basic fact of capitalist globalization. Instead, they are a protectionist maneuver intended to shore up the market share of domestic capitalists at the expense of both foreign competitors and the working class at home.

Under capitalism, "protecting American jobs" has always been a cynical watchword for protecting corporate profits. Capitalists pursue maximum surplus value by keeping wages low, increasing productivity demands, and undermining working conditions. In the entertainment industry, tax incentives and subsidies have not revived a

golden age of stable, well-paid employment. On the contrary, they have enriched the executives of giant firms while squeezing workers.

In California, long hailed as the heart of the global film industry, despite the state pouring hundreds of millions in public funds each year into film and television tax credits, film and television workers have seen a dramatic 22 percent decline of shoot days in the first quarter this year. In October 2024, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom announced plans to more than double the state's already bloated tax credit program to a staggering \$750 million annually.

Newsom's approach is a more parochial version of Trump's; under his leadership, the California Film & Television Tax Credit Program has been repeatedly expanded under the pretext of fighting "runaway production" to states like Georgia, New York, New Mexico, and Montana, or to Canadian hubs like Vancouver and Toronto.

These lavish giveaways have had predictable results: the enrichment of corporate executives and shareholders, while entertainment workers remain mired in insecurity and declining living standards.

This corporate-state alliance is shamelessly endorsed by the union apparatus. The so-called Entertainment Union Coalition (EUC)—comprising the California IATSE Council, Directors Guild of America, Laborers Local 724, SAG-AFTRA, and Teamsters Local 399—proudly proclaims its commitment to "championing the expansion of opportunities for production in California." In reality, these unions serve as junior partners in enforcing nationalist policies that funnel public money to corporate interests while undermining the international solidarity of workers.

Governor Newsom's proposal has been fully backed by

these unions, which, echoing the line of nationalist union bureaucrats such as United Auto Workers president Shawn Fain, support tariffs and protectionist measures that serve only to deepen the exploitation of their members.

Tariffs act as regressive taxes on workers. While ostensibly aimed at foreign producers, they drive up costs across the board, which are then passed down to consumers and workers through higher prices, job cuts and intensified exploitation. They are a blunt instrument of class warfare waged from above. Workers bear the brunt, while CEOs and shareholders rake in the profits.

Beyond the economic implications, the cultural consequences of Trump's tariff regime would be deeply destructive. The administration's claim to "protect American culture" is a thin veneer over a program of ideological control, reminiscent of the cultural policies orchestrated by Joseph Goebbels under Nazi Germany.

Limiting foreign films restricts the American working class's exposure to diverse worldviews and cultural experiences. This cultural narrowing serves the ruling class's long-term goal: the consolidation of a nationalist, pro-capitalist ideological framework that discourages critical thought and stifles dissent.

Foreign films—often produced under different social, political, and economic conditions—have the potential to challenge American imperialist narratives. This is particularly clear in coverage of crises like Gaza, where international filmmakers have illuminated the brutal realities of Israeli apartheid and US imperialism's enabling role (*From Ground Zero, No Other Land, Yalla Parkour, 200 Meters* to name a few). A reduction in the availability of such films would help maintain the suffocating grip of "capitalist realism"—the manufactured belief that there is no alternative to the status quo.

Trump's announcement comes against the backdrop of his wider cultural offensive. In February 2025, he unveiled a plan to dismiss the Kennedy Center's board of trustees and appoint himself as chairman, railing against the Center's alleged promotion of "drag shows targeting our youth."

His pledge to usher in a "Golden Age in Arts and Culture" is a chilling echo of historical fascist campaigns against so-called "degenerate art." Like the Nazi regime's assault on avant-garde and critical artistic expressions, Trump's aim is to purge the arts of progressive, oppositional voices and replace them with nationalist propaganda.

Censorship and intimidation are already tangible within

the industry. The film *The Apprentice*, which portrays Trump's early career and his notorious ties to McCarthyite witch-hunter and corrupt fixer Roy Cohn, has faced significant distribution roadblocks due to legal threats and intimidation tactics. Actor Sebastian Stan, who portrayed the young Trump, has spoken of an atmosphere of fear within Hollywood, where peers avoid association with politically sensitive projects to evade potential repercussions. This climate of fear and suppression is precisely the environment Trump's cultural agenda is designed to cultivate.

Trump's policies extend beyond film and television. His executive orders promoting "patriotic education" aim to reconfigure the entire cultural and educational landscape, enforcing ideological conformity and quashing dissent. Art and education are recast not as vehicles for critical inquiry and self-expression, but as tools for instilling reverence for "American greatness."

By monopolizing cultural production and controlling narrative frameworks, the ruling class seeks to distract, pacify, and divide the working class. National identity is weaponized to obscure class divisions and deflect attention from systemic exploitation. Instead of fostering a cultural environment in which workers can explore the roots of their oppression and envision alternatives, Trump's cultural policies attempt to anesthetize them with hollow patriotism.

The imposition of tariffs on foreign films is part of a broader authoritarian project to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and reinforce capitalist hegemony. The fight against Trump's cultural and economic nationalism must be rooted in the independent political mobilization of the working class, armed with a socialist perspective that transcends national borders and unites workers everywhere in the struggle against capitalism.

Workers must reject trade wars or nationalist "revivals." The way forward lies in the international solidarity of workers and the creation of a global cultural renaissance—one that places human need and creative freedom above the profit interests of capital. Only through the overthrow of capitalism can the arts be liberated from their current subjugation and placed at the service of humanity's genuine enlightenment and emancipation.



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