

# At Cannes film festival: Robert De Niro speaks out against Trump and dictatorship, more opposition to Gaza genocide and Kevin Spacey denounces blacklisting

**Stefan Steinberg****22 May 2025**

Against the background of the glitter and glare of its red carpet ceremonies, this year's Cannes film festival began with a number of powerful statements by actors and directors identifying the extreme threats to democratic rights worldwide at the hands of dictatorial regimes. A mood of social rebellion is touching this milieu too, unlike anything since the late 1960s.

On May 13, veteran actor Robert De Niro was awarded the festival's prestigious Palme d'Or for lifetime achievement. In his short speech to the assembled guests, De Niro slammed Donald Trump and stressed the dangers posed by the current US administration.

Describing Trump as a "philistine president," De Niro emphasised the key role played by the arts and culture, declaring: "In my country, we are fighting like hell for the democracy we once took for granted." He continued:

That affects all of us here, because the arts are democratic, art is inclusive and brings people together, like tonight. Art looks for truth. Art embraces diversity, and that's why art is a threat. That's why we are a threat to autocrats and fascists.

Noting that Trump had appointed himself head of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, De Niro denounced the cuts to funding and support to the arts, humanities and education that have taken place in the past few months. He also lambasted Trump's plans to impose a 100 percent tariff on movies produced outside the US: "You can't put a price on creativity, but apparently you can put a tariff on it ... this is unacceptable. All of these attacks are unacceptable."

Arguing that "this isn't just an American problem, it's a global one," De Niro issued a call for action: "Unlike a film, we can't just all sit back and watch. We have to act, and we have to act now."

While declaring that protests and opposition should be undertaken "without violence, but with great passion and determination," De Niro finished his speech by recalling the revolutionary slogans of the French Revolution—"Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité."

De Niro's contribution was met with tumultuous applause from the audience. It can be followed [here](#).

Cannes was also marked this year by the showing of the important documentary film *Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk* by Iranian director Sepideh Farsi. Based on video conversations, the film centres on the life and work of the valiant 25-year-old Palestinian photojournalist Fatima Hassouna who, over a period of 18 months, filmed the plight of the beleaguered Gaza population.

Farsi last spoke to Hassouna on April 15 to inform her that the film dedicated to her life would be screened in Cannes a month later. On the following day, Hassouna died, along with 10 members of her family, including her pregnant sister, in a direct missile strike on the family's home in northern Gaza. Hassouna was due to be married just a few days later.

Following the deadly missile strike, the IDF issued its pro forma lie that the missile was aimed at a Hamas target and that "measures were taken to minimize the risk to civilians." At a press conference May 15, however, Sepideh Farsi stressed to journalists that she had no doubt that Hassouna's killing in Gaza was an act of assassination.

Citing an investigation by Forensic Architecture, a UK-based research group that investigates cases of state violence and violations of human rights, Farsi stated that: "Two missiles fired from a drone sliced through her building and exploded on the floor where Fatma lived, as they had been programmed to do. It was a targeted attack."

Speaking to the media outlet France 24 before the festival, Farsi condemned the failure to take action against Israel's far-right government and its widely proclaimed aim of expelling Gaza's population. "We cannot just stand by and let the

massacre go on. What will we tell our children when they ask, ‘Why did you do nothing?’ We cannot pretend we didn’t know.”

Additional prominent names have been added to the open letter reported on the WSWS last week, issued by more than 350 film and cultural workers prior to the Cannes festival, criticising the film industry’s silence over “genocide” in Gaza. The original group of signatories included Pedro Almodóvar, Javier Bardem, Melissa Barrera, David Cronenberg, Costa-Gavras, Brian Cox, Marcia Cross, Alfonso Cuarón, Sophie and Ralph Fiennes, Richard Gere, Rebecca Hall, Yórgos Lánthimos, Mike Leigh, Guy Pearce, Mark Ruffalo and Susan Sarandon.

Among the 60 new signatories are Juliette Binoche, Pedro Pascal, Guillermo del Toro, Omar Sy, Riz Ahmed, Jim Jarmusch, Rooney Mara and Camille Cottin. The open letter specifically raises the case of Hassouna and notes that she is one of more than 200 journalists who have been deliberately killed by the Israeli military in the course of its genocidal onslaught against Palestinians. Binoche, president of the main Cannes jury, read excerpts from a poem by Hassouna on the festival’s opening night.

Adding to the general atmosphere of opposition and turmoil in Cannes, on May 20, actor Kevin Spacey was presented the Award for Excellence in Film and Television by the Better World Fund at its 10th Anniversary Gala, an event not officially affiliated with the festival.

Spacey was effectively declared persona non grata by mainstream Hollywood following claims of sexual abuse dating back over 30 years. Each time one of the allegations has been tested in court, juries have resoundingly found in Spacey’s favor. Nevertheless, the US film industry, in all its hypocrisy and cowardice, has continued its relentless exclusion of the Oscar-winning actor.

In his comments at the gala, Spacey noted that “Who would have ever thought that honoring someone who has been exonerated in every court room he’s ever walked into would be thought of as a brave idea. But here we are.”

In remarks worth citing, Spacey spoke along these lines, according to *Deadline*:

I’ve been thinking of someone else you saw earlier on the screen tonight, Kirk Douglas, a great American film star. It was a long, long time ago, but we have to think about the pushback that he received after he made the brave decision to stand up for fellow colleague, two-time Oscar winning screenwriter, Dalton Trumbo, who had been blacklisted from 1947-1960. He was blacklisted. ... He couldn’t find work in Hollywood for 13 years. But even after he was warned if he tried to hire Trumbo as the credited screenwriter for *Spartacus* in 1960, he’d be called a Commie lover,

and his career and professional status would be canceled, Kirk Douglas took the risk, and would later say, and I won’t do my Kirk Douglas impression, but he said this:

“It’s easier for us actors to play the heroes on screen. We get to fight the bad guys and stand up for justice. But in real life, the choices are not always so clear. There are times when one has to stand up for principal [sic].

“I’ve learned a lot from history—it often repeats itself. The Blacklist was a terrible time in our history [we must remember] so that it never happens again”

Kirk Douglas spoke those words in 2014 when he was 98 years old. Of course, people know about Dalton Trumbo and the Hollywood 10, but I suspect very few of you know or ever heard of the 475 other industry professionals whose lives were destroyed by false allegations during that lengthy dark period. And today we find ourselves once again at the intersection of uncertainty and fear in the film business and beyond.

The WSWS will review some of the most significant films shown at the Cannes festival. One highlight is certainly the new documentary *The Six Billion Dollar Man* by US director Eugene Jarecki (*The Trials of Henry Kissinger*, *Why We Fight*, *Reagan* and *The House I Live In*). Jarecki’s film, which premiered at a special screening in Cannes, deals with the origins of WikiLeaks and the seven years spent by its founder Julian Assange confined to the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

In one of his first major public appearances since his release from Belmarsh maximum security prison, Assange, his wife Stella, human rights lawyer Jennifer Robinson and Jarecki posed for photographers in Cannes, but Assange did not address the assembled media. He wore a T-shirt with the names of children killed in Gaza.

Having access to the vast material assembled by WikiLeaks, the documentary, which features comments by former NSA intelligence contractor and whistleblower Edward Snowden and close friend and supporter Pamela Anderson, describes the extreme lengths gone to by successive US governments under Barack Obama and Donald Trump in particular to demonise and silence Assange, including the offer by the first Trump administration to loan Ecuador’s government \$6.5 billion, via the IMF, if it agreed to expel Assange from its embassy.



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