

UAW local opposes US screening of director Roman Polanski's *An Officer and a Spy*

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31 August 2025

Six years after its release, director Roman Polanski's *An Officer and a Spy* (original title *J'accuse*) finally had its US premiere in August at the Film Forum cinema in New York City. The award-winning movie is a powerful depiction of the Dreyfus affair, a scandal that polarized France during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In that episode, Alfred Dreyfus, Lieutenant of the French General Staff, was the victim of a vicious frame-up. In 1894, he was tried, convicted and banished to Devil's Island on the false charge of espionage for Germany.

In *An Officer and a Spy*, Louis Garrel plays Dreyfus. The French officer, who was Jewish, was convicted of treason and sentenced to life imprisonment in an atmosphere of widespread antisemitism. An investigation by Lieutenant Colonel Georges Picquart (played in the film by Jean Dujardin) determined that Dreyfus was innocent, and a strong public movement in support of Dreyfus eventually led to his exoneration in 1906.

As the WWSW noted, in its original review of the film in November 2019, the "resulting exposure of criminal behavior [in the Dreyfus case] implicating virtually the entire French general staff, backed by most of the political establishment, shook the French state to its foundations."

Shamefully, Polanski's important film has been banned from US movie theaters for six years, the product of the pressure of a sordid coalition of far-right forces and pseudo-left feminists.

An Officer and a Spy won the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 2019. It was nominated for four European Film Awards and 12 Césars, which are the national film awards of France. But because Polanski is a target of the #MeToo campaign, none of his films have received US distribution since 2017.

Polanski has been vilified for decades as the result of his having sex with an underage girl in 1977. He pled guilty to one charge of engaging in unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor. Under the terms of the plea agreement, it was expected by both defense and prosecution that the director would receive probation. He fled the US when a vindictive judge, apparently guilty of gross misconduct in the case, threatened to renege on the agreement and sentence Polanski to a lengthy jail term.

The screenings of *An Officer and a Spy* are long, long overdue.

However, United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2110, the union to which Film Forum employees belong, has solidarized itself with the anti-Polanski forces and objected to the screenings. In a lengthy statement on X, the union attempts to stoke moral outrage over Polanski's 1977 conviction. Put plainly, its statement is a call for censorship.

Local 2110 claims it is "disturbed and disappointed" by the film showings. Thinly disguising its appeal for censorship, the union claims that the

take an unequivocal stance against sexual & sexist violence in the film industry.

The Film Forum itself half-capitulated to the middle class witch-hunters by including a programming note citing Polanski's "sexual assault conviction and allegations" and acknowledged that the screenings might "generate strong reactions." But it defended the screenings and the film itself.

In its wretched statement, UAW Local 2110 declares that the Film Forum's note "fails to accurately address the severity" of the accusations against Polanski, who is a "sexual predator," according to the union. By screening the film, Film Forum has become "complicit in the cultural amnesia that normalizes abuse and keeps survivors of sexual violence from being taken seriously," the statement alleges.

Posing as defenders not only of workers, but also of the public, Local 2110 claims that the decision to screen Polanski's movie "betrays the trust between Film Forum's staff and its programmers, and between Film Forum and the film-loving community it serves." This is utter nonsense.

The Polish-born Polanski, whose mother died in Auschwitz and whose pregnant wife was murdered by the Manson gang in August 1969, is not a sexual predator. The battle cry of the #MeToo crusaders has long been "Believe women!" They nevertheless disregard the wishes of Samantha Gailey (now Geimer), the victim in the case. "I don't wish for him to be held to further punishment or consequences," she told the *Los Angeles Times* as long ago as 2008, referring to Polanski. The latter admitted to irresponsible, reprehensible conduct, for which state-appointed psychiatrists, the prosecution and the defense agreed that no prison time was appropriate.

In its statement, the UAW local demonstrates that it has no understanding of the Dreyfus affair or the significance of a film on the subject in the present situation. It blandly and complacently writes that this was "an important nineteenth century political case uncovering institutional corruption and antisemitism in France."

In fact, as our original comment indicated, the scandal "blew apart underlying tensions in French society. During and after the first re-trial of Dreyfus in 1899, governments feared collapse, and France teetered on the brink of civil war."

On the one hand, the *dreyfusards*, novelist Émile Zola and socialist leader Jean Jaurès prominent among them, invoked ideals of equality and justice proclaimed by the French Revolution. In 1898, Zola wrote his deservedly famed open letter, *J'accuse* [*I Accuse*] in which he indicted by name top general staff officers and state officials of criminal behavior in framing Dreyfus and then covering up the army's misconduct. As we wrote in 2019,

workers of Film Forum, demand accountability. We call on Film Forum to ensure that no future premieres programming decision will ever again prioritize the work of sexual predators. We must

Zola's work helped French Socialist leader Jean Jaurès

overcome opposition from syndicalists in the socialist movement led by Jules Guesde, who dismissed the Dreyfus Affair as a mere fight within the officer corps and ignored the political issues involved. Jaurès went on to lead the French socialist movement in a campaign to clear Dreyfus.

On the other hand, the forces of reaction in the army, church and political establishment ranged themselves around the persecution of Dreyfus. They found

their most ardent political and journalistic proponents in figures fusing French nationalism, monarchist opposition to the French Revolution, anti-Semitism, militarism and hatred of socialism. ... Fascist rule and the Holocaust in France [decades later] were largely the coming to power of the *antidreyfusards*.

In the Dreyfus case, Leon Trotsky wrote in 1915,

there was summed up and dramatized the fight against clericalism, against reaction, against parliamentary nepotism, against race hate and militarist hysteria, against backstage intrigues amongst the general staff, against the servility of the courts—against all the despicable forces that the powerful party of reaction could swing into motion to achieve its ends.

How appropriate is such a film under conditions of the growth of far-right and fascistic conspiracies, in the US organized and led from the White House! How urgently needed it is!

But Local 2110 is “disturbed and disappointed” by the showing of such a work because its director pled guilty to sex with a minor almost half a century ago. Truly, “let justice be done though the heavens fall.”

The strong influence of identity politics in artistic circles is thoroughly pernicious. It has relentlessly directed certain social layers away from earthshaking problems—war, dictatorship, fascism, social inequality—and toward self-centered concerns that represent no challenge whatsoever to the status quo. It has encouraged subjective, irrationalist and anti-democratic tendencies, including the repudiation of the precept of innocent until proven guilty and due process.

We stand by the contention we made more than 30 years ago, that racial and gender obsessions

have not helped anyone to see the world and its most fundamental social relationships more clearly; they have had precisely the opposite, narrowing effect. They have objectively damaged artistic and intellectual work.

In the present case, Local 2110 advocates sacrificing an important contribution to the fight against authoritarianism and fascism because it disapproves of the director’s personal life and even misdeeds. This is a slippery slope that ends in the ideological mire. Will Local 2110 provide a list of whom it considers to be acceptable artists? What about Charlie Chaplin, another alleged “sexual predator”?

Will the UAW local call on the Film Forum to repudiate—retroactively—its December 2023 celebration of Chaplin’s films? At the time, the cinema excitedly announced the

U.S premiere of new 4K restoration of A WOMAN OF PARIS and Chaplin’s greatest feature-length masterpieces — all in 35mm: THE KID, THE GOLD RUSH, THE CIRCUS, CITY LIGHTS, MODERN TIMES, THE GREAT DICTATOR and MONSIEUR VERDOUX.

Chaplin was driven out of the US in part on the basis of trumped up sex charges, As we noted in 2018:

The desire to discredit Chaplin’s generally anti-capitalist views and undermine his standing in the public eye were the motivating forces behind the US authorities’ attack. However, the element of sex scandal provided the FBI with the weapon, through the medium of the filthy American media, with which to brand Chaplin as a “pervert” and a “beast” deserving to be ostracized, imprisoned or deported (the comedian-director had maintained his British citizenship).

The rhetoric employed by Local 2110 is the discredited language of the #MeToo sexual witch-hunt, which seeks to silence or banish anyone accused of sexual impropriety, regardless of whether the accusations have ever been substantiated or tested in court. The upper-middle class moralists of #MeToo put forward this new McCarthyism in part to advance their own careers.

Everywhere the ruling class is promoting nationalism and hatred of immigrants. It is waging imperialist war and supporting genocide, even as NATO is riven with internal conflict. The flagrant lies about Dreyfus and the antisemitism of 1890s France find their inverted mirror image, ironically, in today’s campaign against “antisemitism,” which has become in many instances the ruling-class term for opposition to the genocide being committed by Israel.

In his press notes on *An Officer and a Spy*, Polanski found parallels between his experience and that of Dreyfus. “I can see the same determination to deny the facts and condemn me for things I have not done,” he wrote. “My work is not therapy. However, I must admit that I am familiar with many of the workings of the apparatus of persecution shown in the film, and that has clearly inspired me.”

Polanski “grossly trivializes the Dreyfus affair” with this comparison, according to the UAW. Why? At a time of unrestrained lying, witch-hunting and blackbaling, such legitimate comparisons must be made, and their significance understood.

The UAW has refused to defend its members from the “apparatus of persecution” that Polanski described. Columbia University suspended or expelled several members of UAW Local 2710, along with many other students, for protesting the genocide. The union has verbally opposed this attack on free speech but has not organized a single strike or protest for the reinstatement of the students. Even when Columbia expelled Local 2710 President Grant Miner—one day before contract negotiations were to begin—the union again confined itself to empty phrases.

Still more damning is the UAW’s active participation in the “apparatus of persecution.” Last year, the union hosted a conference to endorse the reelection of President Joe Biden. When protesters chanted, “Ceasefire now,” during Biden’s speech, union toughs joined Secret Service agents in dragging them out of the hall. This action not only gave the lie to the union’s hot air about freedom of speech, but also demonstrated the national leadership’s endorsement of genocide, whatever the positions of local officials.

Though UAW President Shawn Fain was presented as a reformer, he rules over the union in much the same way as a crime boss controls his

organization. A report by the court monitor overseeing the UAW revealed that Fain regularly threatens violence against those who question him. He hurled profanities at Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Mock and stripped her of some of her responsibilities for refusing to authorize certain expenses.

The words and action of Local 2110 in regard to the screening of *An Officer and a Spy* are deplorable. The union bureaucracy is the instrument of some of the most reactionary sentiments, anti-democratic and repressive. Workers at the Film Forum need to reject these positions and resolutely defend film work that delves seriously into the most complex and difficult social realities.



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