

2026 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

First They Came for My College: Right-wing ‘human dust’ mount takeover of New College of Florida

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This is the third in a series of articles on the 2026 San Francisco International Film Festival, April 24-May 4, which made a number of films available online. The first part was posted May 1, the second May 10.

In early 2023, Florida’s Governor Ron DeSantis overhauled the board of trustees of New College of Florida, located in Sarasota, in what is generally termed a “hostile takeover.” The school, which started out life in 1960 as a private liberal arts college and was later absorbed into the state’s public university system, had “a reputation for being one of the most progressive higher-education institutions in the state” (*Tampa Bay Times*).

First They Came for My College is a documentary film, directed by Patrick Bresnan, that recounts the whole filthy right-wing operation, as well as the protests it generated at New College.

DeSantis, one of America’s more repulsive political figures (and that is saying a great deal!), plotted to destroy the school as it was in the interests of creating a far-right ideological training camp along the lines of Hillsdale College in Michigan. The documentary includes footage of DeSantis asserting that he planned to free New College from its burden of “left ideology” and that “Florida is where woke goes to die.”

The Florida governor brought in a group of disreputable individuals, including Christopher Rufo, a “far-right propagandist and a fellow at the hard-right Manhattan Institute” (Southern Poverty Law Center), to form a majority on the New College board of trustees. They proceeded to fire the previous president and install Richard Corcoran, former speaker of the Florida House of Representatives, as the institution’s new president, with a base salary of \$699,000 (\$400,000 more than his predecessor).

DeSantis had appointed Corcoran as education commissioner in 2018, although the latter had no

background in education whatsoever. Corcoran did make a name for himself during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 by insisting that schools in Florida “reopen their buildings for in-person teaching for the upcoming school year, despite the growing number of coronavirus cases throughout the state” (*U.S. News & World Report*). He resigned as education commissioner in August 2023 as a corruption scandal threatened to engulf him.

In any event, Bresnan’s film sets out the sordid details of this far-right maneuver in all its repulsive transparency.

In response to the change of the board, 68 faculty members wrote an open letter of protest. According to media reports, some 40 percent of the faculty left within the first year of the takeover. There were notable departures in the science and marine biology departments.

Since 2023, New College has dropped nearly 60 spots in national liberal arts rankings, and a recently released report shows that spending per student at the college is more than triple most other publicly-supported colleges in Florida (Masslive).

At board meetings, angry staff and parents challenge the new right-wing bloc. DeSantis arrives at the campus, to protests, and signs a bill abolishing DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). Students and faculty, who are “hangovers” from the previous edition of New College, are pushed out in favor of athletes and those aligned with the ultra-right ethos. Professors eligible for tenure but apparently suspect in the eyes of the new regime are rejected.

The gender studies program is terminated, and books related to the program are trashed. “When books go, so does democracy,” a critic alleges. The film’s director, Bresnan,

told an interviewer that the episode of “the missing books” was one of the instances “where I started to see this as fascism.”

The graduation speaker, billionaire Joe Ricketts, founder of TD Ameritrade and a pal of Corcoran’s, is booed down when he tries to talk about how he earned his wealth and warn about the challenges of artificial intelligence. Some in the crowd chant “Free Palestine” and wear the Palestinian flag.

A final word in the film: “Since Donald Trump’s reelection, the hostile takeover of New College has been a blueprint for attacks on colleges and universities across the United States.”

The situation at New College is dreadful, and the situation of the students, who find themselves captives in this new right-wing cesspool, is lamentable. Reactionary ignoramuses have seized control of a major institution of “higher learning,” with intellectual-cultural catastrophe bound to follow.

The proliferation of essentially criminal figures, such as DeSantis, Corcoran, Rufo, Abbott in Texas and many others, disproves the “bad Trump” theory of history. What accounts for the elevation of *all* these sociopathic individuals to positions of power?

The WSWS, paraphrasing Trotsky in regard to Hitler, noted that “not every businessman is a Trump. But there is more than a particle of Trump in a substantial subset of the American business class.”

Among the executives of countless commercial real estate operations, private equity firms, cryptocurrency ventures, there are innumerable individuals whose personality, mannerisms, objectives and methods replicate, to a lesser or greater extent, those of the American president. Trump did not create this culture. He is both the personification of the ruling corporate-financial oligarchy and its criminal endpoint. In his persona and modus operandi, the distinction between a CEO and mob boss is obliterated.

As for the supposed struggle of Rufo and others against “critical race theory” and “woke” culture, this is largely, although not entirely, a red herring. There is no doubt genuine racism, anti-gay bigotry afoot, but these political forces are after bigger, far more terrifying game. In the end, all the desperate efforts at censorship, book banning and other forms of repression are aimed at blocking youth in particular from making contact with socialism and Marxism.

This is the specter that haunts, and always has haunted, the American ruling elite since it attained imperialist power status.

As the WSWS pointed out in 2021, the Republican Party

is mobilizing all the reactionary forces at its disposal ... for a full-scale assault on the teaching of any left-wing, socialist or Marxist ideas at American schools and universities, which the Republicans intend to carry out under the banner of a fight against “critical race theory.”...

A new law in Tennessee, for example, bans along with critical race theory any materials that promote “division between, or resentment of, a ... social class, or class of people.”

Professors and established programs at New College and other institutions deserve to be defended against the fascist right. However, the orientation to gender and race issues at the expense of concern with the conditions of the vast majority, the working class of every color and sexual orientation, weakens and often renders ineffectual opposition to the DeSantis-Rufo-Corcoran sort of attack. It opens the door to the anger being channeled back to the Democratic Party.

If the far-right assault is simply viewed as an offensive against “queerness,” for example, in isolation from the wars abroad and the wars against workers’ rights and conditions at home, the battle is already largely lost.

Trotsky referred to the personnel of the fascist movements as “human dust,” pointing out that

on the scales of the revolutionary struggle, a thousand workers in one big factory represent a force a hundred times greater than a thousand petty officials, clerks, their wives and their mothers-in-law.

These are some of the considerations that opponents of operations like the one mounted at New College should bear in mind.



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