

## Directors Withdraw from Global Film Festivals Amid Political & Sponsorship Controversies



**Los Angeles, California Mar 1, 2026** ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - With the spring international film festival season in full swing, a "wave of withdrawals" triggered by geopolitical stances and sponsor credentials continues to brew within the European and American film industries. Several independent producers and participating directors have taken substantive action, officially withdrawing films originally slated to premiere at major festivals in protest of the organizing committees' funding sources and associated political leanings.

This current wave of withdrawal controversies was fully ignited during the recently concluded Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale). On February 24, a coalition of over 80 independent filmmakers named "Filmmakers Against Complicity" held a rally outside the Berlinale's closing ceremony. Coalition spokesperson and independent producer Sarah Abdullah read a joint statement to the media on-site, pointing directly to several major European film festivals that have accepted funding tied to military-industrial enterprises and controversial sovereign wealth funds. Holding a placard that read "Reject Capital Whitewashing," Abdullah stated: "We cannot call for human rights on the screen while allowing our artwork to become a tool to whitewash violence." This protest has quickly sparked a chain reaction within the industry.

Faced with growing boycott calls, some official institutions have attempted to mount an emergency response, but the wave of film withdrawals is only intensifying. On February 25, Mathew Pond, co-president of the Documentary Association of Europe (DAE), admitted in an interview with *Screen Daily* that major festival organizing committees are facing unprecedented pressure. "Every day, we receive

emails from directors and producers demanding a review of sponsor lists, or outright demanding to withdraw their films," Pond revealed to reporters. "At the beginning of this week alone, we received formal notices of withdrawal from spring screenings for at least five major documentaries." He stated that if a transparent sponsor vetting mechanism is not established swiftly, the established schedules of major film festivals will face widespread paralysis.

On the morning of February 26, Thomas Leblanc, a senior curator for the French documentary festival Cinéma du Réel, publicly announced his resignation, pushing this industry storm to a new climax. In an email to the media, Leblanc frankly admitted that serious divisions had arisen within the organizing committee over whether to sever sponsorship ties with a multinational corporation deeply embroiled in Middle Eastern geopolitical conflicts. He wrote in his letter: "When we sit in conference rooms turning a blind eye to creators' protests just to save our budget, the film festival has already lost its soul." Leblanc's indignant resignation has not only stalled preparations for certain sections of the festival but also completely shattered the illusion of "institutional neutrality" that film festivals attempt to maintain, sounding an alarm for other international festivals opening in March.

The political cloud hanging over the Berlinale is gradually spreading. Rumors online suggest that Swedish director Ian Purnell has announced the withdrawal of his film out of dissatisfaction with CPH:DOX accepting "blood-tainted sponsorship," which has plunged Scandinavia's largest documentary film festival, known for its "free and bold" spirit, into a public relations dilemma. North America's largest experimental film festival, the Ann Arbor Film Festival, is facing a similar wave of withdrawals. Executive Director Leslie Raymond revealed that director Mehrdad Oskouei, in an email to the organizing committee, stated that the Ann Arbor Film Festival committee "failed to maintain an appropriate distance from politics," and thus decided to withdraw. Directed by Mehrdad Oskouei, "A Fox Under A Pink Moon," which exposes the grim realities of Iranian society, won the Best Film award at IDFA 2025.

## Media Contact

Los Angeles Daily News

\*\*\*\*\*@dailynews.com

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