**Headline:** The Real Reason Disney Is Defying DeSantis

**Teaser:** A corporation does not have morals—it has a bottom line. Disney’s lawsuit against Florida is more about being able to reap profits while underpaying workers than it is about protecting LGBTQ communities.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

**Author Bio:** Sonali Kolhatkar is an award-winning multimedia journalist. She is the founder, host, and executive producer of “[Rising Up With Sonali](https://risingupwithsonali.com/),” a weekly television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. Her forthcoming book is [*Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice*](https://citylights.com/city-lights-published/rise-up-the-power-of-narrative-in-pursu/) (City Lights Books, 2023). She is a writing fellow for the [Economy for All](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/) project at the Independent Media Institute and the racial justice and civil liberties editor at [Yes! Magazine](https://www.yesmagazine.org/authors/sonali-kolhatkar). She serves as the co-director of the nonprofit solidarity organization the [Afghan Women’s Mission](https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/) and is a co-author of [*Bleeding Afghanistan*](https://www.sevenstories.com/books/2947-bleeding-afghanistan). She also sits on the board of directors of [Justice Action Center](https://justiceactioncenter.org/), an immigrant rights organization.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Economy for All*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Activism, Democratic Party, Documentary, Economy, Education, Gender, GOP/Right Wing, Health Care, Identity Politics, Labor, Media, Politics, North America/United States of America, Opinion, News, Time-Sensitive, Women’s Rights

**[Article Body:]**

Florida’s Republican governor Ron DeSantis is eager to cast himself as the new and improved Donald Trump. He has waged a relentless war against what he calls “woke ideology” by attacking the rights of vulnerable minorities to [teach and learn history](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/23/desantis-banning-african-american-studies-00079027), to read [literature](https://thehill.com/homenews/3923013-florida-board-bans-this-book-is-gay-from-middle-school-libraries/), and to get life-saving medical care such as [gender-affirming treatment](https://www.npr.org/2023/02/20/1157493433/florida-bans-gender-affirming-care-trans-kids) and [reproductive health care](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/13/politics/florida-abortion-ban/index.html). Now, his attack on Florida’s largest corporation is being cast in the same vein of “[good versus evil](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/27/media/ron-desantis-disney-reliable-sources/index.html).”

Except that the DeSantis-Disney war ought really to be viewed as an opportunity to call Republicans out on their slavish devotion to Big Business and dare them to follow through with stripping not just the Disney corporation, but all money-hungry companies of their dependence on public financing. Both DeSantis and Disney are predatory, albeit in different ways.

Disney, a company that has deep cultural sway over Americans for being a purveyor of “magic” and “happiness,” has enjoyed a very special and extremely unusual arrangement in Orlando, Florida, where its Walt Disney World Resort occupies tens of thousands of acres named the [Reedy Creek Improvement District](https://www.rcid.org/). Since 1967, the state of Florida has allowed the corporation to [govern the area](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/what-is-special-tax-designation-disney-might-lose-2022-04-22/) and even to issue tax bonds to residents in order to pay for municipal services while being exempt from certain regulations and taxes.

Rather than viewing Disney World as “the happiest place on earth,” Sophie Weiner, writing in [Popular Mechanics](https://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/infrastructure/a15155208/disney-world-government/) in 2018, explained that, “Disney World is what it looks like if you give a corporation full control over an area of land as big as San Francisco. It’s worked out great for the company, which counts on the park for 14 percent of its $2 billion yearly earnings.” Further, in 2021, the state of Florida gifted the company a [massive $580 million tax break](https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2021-07-23/walt-disney-co-gets-580-million-florida-tax-break-california-jobs) in exchange for moving about 2,000 jobs from its California locations to Florida.

But in March 2022 [Disney took a stand](https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085130633/disney-response-florida-bill-dont-say-gay) against the Parental Rights in Education Law, which has been dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” act, prompting DeSantis’s ire. A month later Florida’s Republican [legislature dissolved Disney’s special status](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/florida-lawmakers-send-bill-meant-to-eliminate-disneys-special-district-to-governors-desk-1235133478/) in a law that is to take effect on June 1, 2023. DeSantis explained the move saying, “I’m just not comfortable having that type of agenda get special treatment in my state.” In other words, Disney’s special corporate arrangement would not be tolerated if it challenged his homophobia.

Except that Disney had to be pushed hard into taking such a moral stand. For [weeks after the bill](https://www.msnbc.com/the-reidout/reidout-blog/disney-ceo-dont-say-gay-bill-desantis-rcna19483) was announced the company was perfectly content enjoying the largesse of Florida even as activists were demanding it speak out against a law prohibiting teachings that touch on gender identity and sexual orientation to kids in kindergarten through third grade. [Disney’s own workers](https://apnews.com/article/business-lifestyle-arts-and-entertainment-florida-orlando-6d1a546e8900f0d712a1b72e8d5213a1) protested their employer’s lack of courage. The hashtag [#BoycottDisney](https://www.cbr.com/disney-fans-boycott-funding-dont-say-gay-bill/) began trending. The company eventually, reluctantly, [reacted](https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/11/disney-pledges-to-stop-florida-campaign-donations-dont-say-gay-00016705#:~:text=Florida-,Disney%20pledges%20to%20stop%20Florida%20campaign%20donations%20over%20%27Don%27t,cycle%2C%20campaign%20finance%20reports%20show.) by suspending *all* its political donations in the state of Florida to both parties—not exactly the most principled stand.

To his credit, Disney’s then-CEO [Bob Chapek](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/business/disney-ceo-florida-lgbtq-bill.html) also made public statements against the bill and offered a $5 million donation to the Human Rights Campaign (which the group rejected).

But earlier this year Florida, realizing that dissolving Disney’s tax status would end up dumping a billion-dollar bond debt onto the public, quickly scrambled to [restore the special district](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/disney-to-keep-special-perks-under-florida-bill-allowing-gov-ron-desantis-to-assume-control-of-special-tax-district-1235320186/) while muzzling Disney. A new law will allow the governor to appoint leadership positions of Reedy Creek Improvement District instead of allowing Disney to do so.

Representative Anna Eskamani, a progressive Democrat in the state legislature, told [the Hollywood Reporter](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/disney-to-keep-special-perks-under-florida-bill-allowing-gov-ron-desantis-to-assume-control-of-special-tax-district-1235320186/), “The inner workings [of the special district] stay the same. The only difference is Disney won’t challenge the governor on anything anymore.” The company was initially happy and Disney World’s head [Jeff Vahle](https://www.nytimes.com/article/disney-florida-desantis.html) said his company was “ready to work within this new framework.”

Testing this new arrangement DeSantis has revved up his culture war, [approving a rule change](https://apnews.com/article/desantis-florida-dont-say-gay-ban-684ed25a303f83208a89c556543183cb) to expand the Don’t Say Gay bill to all grades and sending a message to LGBTQ youth that their lives don’t matter. But the new board that he appointed to govern Disney’s special district [voted to nullify a company plan](https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2023/04/26/disney-sues-desantis-after-board-votes-to-get-rid-of-special-agreement/?sh=49fbc6832a50) to expand and develop the area. It was only then that Disney filed a lawsuit against DeSantis claiming he violated their first amendment rights over the homophobic law.

Every step of the way Disney was happy to suck up all the tax perks and financial autonomy it could get away with, regardless of whom its host was harming. Only when its financial status was threatened has it claimed to be on the side of LGBTQ communities.

Aside from Eskamani, few Democrats have called Disney out for its hypocrisy and for reaping special financial perks, instead supporting the corporation for being a job creator. Democratic Congressional representative Darren Soto [chastised DeSantis](https://www.businessinsider.com/desantis-gets-chilly-reception-in-dc-from-frustrated-florida-democrats-2023-4), saying, “It’d be nice if he stopped attacking Central Florida’s top employer.” He added, “We’re talking about trying to get [Disney] to invest more money to create more jobs. And this is not helpful to those efforts.”

Soto’s words suggest that he sees Disney performing a massive favor to the state by operating its resort and parks there instead of the other way around. But the sort of jobs that Disney creates is precisely what has fueled deep income inequality in the U.S. Its presence in Florida has meant thousands of poorly paid jobs that keep Floridians in a hand-to-mouth existence, unable to cope with the rising cost of living. Aubrey Jewett, a University of Central Florida political science professor, [told USA Today](https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/politics/2021/10/14/walt-disney-world-remains-florida-biggest-political-power-50-years-later/5919720001/), “Yes, we have a lot of jobs. But they don’t pay very much. And we seem to have lost ground over time, especially when it comes to housing costs.”

One Disney worker told [the Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/dec/08/florida-disney-employees-higher-wages-cost-of-living-soars), “We’re grossly, grossly underpaid for the hours that we work,” and that “[a] lot of Disney workers are barely squeaking by. You have workers with families sleeping in their car.”

Disney heiress Abigail Disney, who is an outspoken progressive, even made a [documentary](https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/abigail-disney-the-american-dream-documentary-182309994.html) about the poor treatment of Disneyland workers in Anaheim, California, where the company also enjoys [special tax benefits](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-disney-tax/disney-wins-extension-of-tax-break-in-anaheim-california-idUSKCN0PI0RO20150708) in exchange for creating jobs and where it was [granted an exception](https://www.ocregister.com/2021/11/03/disney-not-subject-to-anaheims-living-wage-ballot-measure-judge-rules/) to a voter-passed minimum wage increase. Just as in Florida, Disney’s California jobs are [worth about as little](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/27/us/disneyland-employees-wages.html) as the taxes the company pays to the state.

In addition to constantly being granted exemptions for taxes and regulations, corporations like Disney enjoy a mythical status in the U.S. for being so massively profitable that their dollar signs obscure capitalism’s ugly underbelly.

Disney should not have control over land, resources, tax regulations, or wages. And lawmakers should not be allowed to trample over the rights of minorities. It’s not difficult to oppose both Disney’s power grab and DeSantis’s dangerous culture wars. Indeed, both positions are fully consistent with progressive ideals of protecting and furthering the rights of human beings.