

Britain:

Labour government to use police against school children

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The British Labour government is to extend police powers and fine parents up to £1,000 to deal with school truancies and exclusions from school. Prime Minister Tony Blair announced the proposals in Parliament on May 11, presenting the "Truancy and School Exclusion Report" prepared by his Social Exclusion Unit (SEU).

The SEU was launched by the government last year as an "anti-poverty task force," responsible for coordinating the functions of various government departments. As well as government ministers, it includes Guy Gardener, Chief Superintendent of Kent County Constabulary; Amanda Jordan, Senior Executive of the National Westminster Bank; and Angela Sarkis of the Church Urban Fund.

The report states, "Truancy and exclusions have reached a crisis point." At least one million children are truant each year, whilst 100,000 children are excluded temporarily from school and 13,500 are excluded permanently. The latter figure represents a three-fold increase since 1991-1992. Young boys between the ages of 12 and 15 make up the overwhelming majority of exclusions, but the rate is increasing most rapidly amongst children of primary school age (7-11 years old). This figure rose by 18 per cent in 1995-96.

The SEU acknowledges that this crisis results from the tremendous increase in social deprivation over the last two decades. Under the heading, "Why it happens," their report notes that "problems in families play an important role... Poverty and fear of a lack of job opportunities can undermine young people's motivation. Children can become disaffected when school seems boring, too difficult or unlikely to lead anywhere."

"Truants tend to be older pupils, and from poorer backgrounds... parents of truants were more likely to be in low-skilled than in professional or managerial jobs, and more likely to be in Local Authority [public] housing than

owner-occupiers. For boys, living in a single parent family appears to be a risk factor. Some studies have suggested that truancy is more common in inner-city areas."

School absenteeism is particularly high amongst traveller's [gypsies'] children, ethnic minorities and children living in a care unit. Another contributory factor is when children are called upon "to look after younger brothers and sisters during the day, or to take on excessive responsibilities for helping out at home."

On school exclusions, the report found that children with learning difficulties are six times more likely to be excluded, as are black youth. Exclusions "tend to be higher in areas of social deprivation. The regions with the highest rates are inner and outer London."

Under the heading, "Why have the figures risen?" the report explains: "Many of the same social and family risk factors apply to exclusion as to truancy. Research findings emphasise the considerable disadvantage excluded pupils generally experience, with evidence of high levels of family stress, including unemployment, low income and family disruption. OFSTED [the Government education watchdog] research highlights poor acquisition of basic skills, particularly literacy, limited aspirations and opportunities, poverty, and poor relationships with pupils, parents or teachers. Since some of these factors have worsened over the last two decades, these factors may explain some of the rise in exclusions."

Another major element is the legacy of the previous Conservative Party (Tory) government's education policies. To legitimise their attack on public spending, the Tories claimed that educational attainment had nothing to do with resources and funding but was due to "school standards." Thousands of teaching jobs were cut, educational budgets were squeezed and teachers forced to

take on ever larger class sizes.

In addition, the Tories began the publication of "League Tables," ranking schools according to academic performance and giving parents the right to choose schools. This has intensified the social divisions within education and forced schools into direct competition with each other. The report notes that there is a growing tendency to exclude children with educational or behavioural difficulties so that a school's performance tables are not affected. The teaching unions have played a negative role in this development. In the last years of the Tory government, the unions forced a number of schools to expel children with behavioural problems, by refusing to work whilst the children were on the premises.

The SEU notes that "some feel that many behavioural problems are the response of those who have fallen behind and are not being helped to catch up," and that "more external support for learning and behavioural needs, specialist staff, time and expertise are needed." It continues, "many teachers were unsure of the distinction between poor behaviour and behaviour springing from deep-seated emotional disturbance, requiring treatment."

Of those children permanently excluded, only a third are reintegrated back into schooling. The rest lose their entitlement to full-time education. The 25,000 children placed in these circumstances each year receive "education otherwise." This can mean anything from a special referral unit to just a few hours schooling a week. Overall, "education otherwise" children receive the equivalent of just 10 per cent of the tuition in mainstream schools.

This has a devastating effect on the quality of their lives. Excluded pupils and those with poor school attendance are more likely to be unemployed, homeless and involved in crime. The SEU report documents the extent of the social catastrophe this has produced and the consequences of poverty and inequality for children's education. Yet there is no proposal for extra funding for schools, teachers or special needs projects. Rather the Labour Party government has responded to this latest manifestation of the social crisis in the same way it has responded to every other--by calls for stiffer policing.

Blair proposes to give police the power to take truants into custody, even where no crime has been committed. At present, Education Welfare Officers are responsible for combating truancy. But under the Labour proposal, school attendance will cease to be an educational matter and will become a criminal one. Since the majority of school truants are acknowledged to be those with social or

educational problems, it is obvious that the criminalisation of truancy does not address the root causes.

As part of Blair's proposal, the courts are to be given extended powers to impose a twelve-month "parenting order" on the parents of truants, carrying a financial penalty of up to £1,000 if there is not an improvement in their child's behaviour. Such financial penalties on already hard-pressed families can only compound the social and educational problems facing truant youth.

Other measures outlined by Blair will exacerbate the crisis in education. The Labour government is to establish truancy targets for Local Education Authority's (LEAs), with legal measures to enforce them. By the year 2002, LEAs will be legally required to provide all excluded children with full-time education. The report makes clear that this is intended to ensure that LEAs pressure the schools to keep exclusion rates down. Since there will be no extra funding for alternative full-time schooling, this will increase classroom problems and turn schools into little more than holding pens.

At the same time, Labour is utilising this crisis to encourage the further privatisation of public services. The report states that LEA provision in special needs education is "both ineffective and unduly expensive. Some voluntary organisations believe that they are more effective and cheaper. The Government is attracted to the idea that LEAs should look at such options and Department of Education and Employment can also require the LEA to contract the services out if it is failing in its performance."



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