

British Army exploits recession to step up youth recruitment

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The British Army is stepping up its recruitment campaigns amongst youth and schoolchildren as it seeks to fulfil commitments to fight new colonial wars around the world.

The army's job is eased by the social destruction wrought by the breakdown of British capitalism and the sharp increase in joblessness, particularly among youth and young workers. Almost 1 million of young people aged 18 to 24 years of age are currently unemployed. Consequently, the last period has seen a rise in recruitment. Some 22,620 new recruits joined in the year to March 2009—a substantial increase on the 11,460 three years ago. Figures suggest the armed forces will reach full strength—178,860 troops—in 2011. Murdoch's *Sky News* hailed the recruitment surge as the “silver lining of the downturn.”

Before the recession, the army was relying on increasingly desperate measures to overcome its manpower shortage. In 2007, the maximum recruiting age was raised from 26 to 33. The Financial Retention Initiative—a cash bonus of £15,000—was introduced to encourage serving soldiers to remain in the army for an additional two years and so fill the gap caused by large number of soldiers leaving early. In addition to this, soldiers are being offered £650 if they persuade others to join.

The army claims increased interest from colleges and universities, traditionally reluctant areas for recruitment. The Ministry of Defence said universities play an “important role in raising awareness among young people about the important work our Armed Forces do and we enjoy a good relationship with most universities.” It has been increasing its presence at recruiting fairs.

The growing ties between academia and the military sparked protests from students at various campuses including Sussex and Sheffield in 2008 and 2009. However, university managements have been quick to condemn such activity, and in the case of Sussex, swiftly punish the protestors.

The British Army's own research reveals that 68 percent of 17-to-21-year-olds possess no career path and are potentially impressionable. It has commissioned radio and television commercials over the last year portraying army life as full of opportunities enabling young people to discover and unlock their potential and develop their character. Naturally, there is

silence on the real effects of imperialist warfare.

Also omitted from the commercials is any reference to the consequences of post-traumatic stress, which afflicts many soldiers, destroying their lives and those of their families. There has been a 30 percent rise in the last five years of veterans serving prison sentences. A study last year found that 8,500 soldiers were serving prison sentences, one tenth of the total UK prison population, the majority for domestic violence. This was attributed to the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and prior wars, but it is just as likely to be the result of the violent culture encouraged within the army.

To ease the concern that many potential recruits have about personal risk, particularly in light of the continuous reports of casualties, recruiters are portraying the occupation in Afghanistan as relatively safe and targeting parents—portrayed as the “prime barriers” to potential recruits.

The army has increased spending on recruitment campaigns—£95 million in 2008, an increase of £30 million from previous years—and made use of the latest marketing techniques to sell militarism and acquire the necessary cannon fodder.

It has contracted the marketing agency “Twenty Six” and formed other public-private partnerships to develop software and design websites. Reviewers have praised its experiential and digital marketing as ahead of others in the field.

In 2007, the army formed a partnership with the digital agency Publicis Dialog to design a website similar to the community-based website MySpace and YouTube noted for their popularity amongst youth. On the website, soldiers upload their blogs and videos to share their experiences with potential recruits, although it was also revealed that all uploaded content would be closely monitored.

The other aspect of this marketing has been to draw on research by the US military showing video games to be a versatile tool for recruiting. In 2009, the army in conjunction with Publicis and another company, Skive, began a series of television commercials called Start Thinking Soldier (STS), which presented four different military scenarios and asked, “What would you do?” The audience could then go online to engage in these scenarios through online games, which of course sought to portray war in a sanitised form with complete

disregard for ethical considerations, the causes of war and the cost in human life.

Following the STS campaign, the army has opened new showrooms in high streets. They have been sensationalised, outfitted with computer terminals and life-sized rifles to further reinforce the similarity between combat games and war.

In May 2009, the army participated at various arenas around the UK, most notably the Game-On exhibition at London's Olympia, presenting its new stock of VR headsets, which further blur the boundary between the horrific world of war and the harmless world of games.

The army had also turned its attention towards younger age groups. In 2006, the head of recruitment strategies, Colonel David Allfrey, announced a shift of focus from school leavers with a plan of "raising awareness" of the army targeted at children as young as 7. The strategy consisted of the army holding presentations in schools and a website dedicated to catering to under-16s called *My Camouflage*. The Rowntree Charitable Trust condemned the development for encouraging a highly sanitised portrayal of war and army life. Teachers also criticised the recycling of the lies used to justify the criminal invasion of Iraq in the army's school-orientated propaganda.

The army has targeted schools in the most deprived areas of Britain, most notably in Wales, Scotland, the Isle of Man and Northern Ireland. Soldiers recently returned from service in Afghanistan and Iraq called "skirmishers" are employed to go into these areas and promote army life in one-day "taster" sessions.

The most reactionary expression of this drive was the unveiling in 2009 of a new range of toys by the British toy producer Character Group in conjunction with the Ministry of Defence. Officials hope the toys will be a "learning tool" to stimulate the interest of youth in the military and the Afghanistan campaign as prescribed by the British state and pro-war media; and to learn the ethos and subordination—referred to as discipline—within the military. Child psychologist Amanda Gummer came to the military's defence, claiming that they will provide "positive strong role models." However, this overlooks the fact that children will be encouraged to uncritically absorb the official (though constantly changing) justifications for war and identify the British military (and therefore British nationalism and the underlying class interests) as heroic and good.

Despite the huge sums being devoted to these recruiting campaigns, there is still a great deal of reluctance to join the army. As a result, the British Army has had to depend heavily on overseas recruitment. In 2000, the Commonwealth accounted for 820 troops in the British Army. By 2008, this figure had risen to 7,000. Nearly 16 percent of all new recruits in 2008 were from Southern Ireland.

The British state is acutely aware of the mass opposition to imperialist war—a sentiment recognised in 2008 by commander of recruiting Andrew Jackson who declared, "The Army makes

a real and broad contribution to society, one that is not always known about or understood by the public.... [A]t a time when the public has limited contact with soldiers and when awareness of what the Army does rarely extends beyond the news reports they see of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is very important to promote understanding and engagement with the Army."

As a result, there has been a determined effort to raise sympathy for the "poor squaddie." The Ministry of Defence declared, "however people view specific military operations, everyone should be able to respect the brave and professional job our Armed Forces perform." Such efforts are aimed at silencing any public articulation to the wars and raise the morale within the army towards these unpopular wars.

In 2008, the army launched a publicity campaign dubbed "To the Best" involving a website dedicated to personal stories of British troops helping local inhabitants during overseas operations. Also involved in the campaign was the proposal to have troops wear their uniforms in public and establish an Armed Services Day.

The efforts to increase recruitment to the Army and give it a more central role in society must be seen as part and parcel of the turn to colonial wars of conquest, which are driven by the struggle between the major powers to carve up the planet's strategic resources.

Under conditions of a global economic slump and a deepening gulf between rich and poor, such an agenda is incompatible with the maintenance of democratic forms of rule. Rather, society and political life are becoming militarised, in order that ever worsening levels of exploitation and attacks on essential services can be imposed, and the "nation" placed in the service of the bourgeoisie's imperialist ambitions.



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