Exposure of sex-for-fees web site underscores UK student poverty

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The *Independent* reported recently on a web site offering students up to £15,000 a year to have sex with its clients.

A reporter used a concealed camera to record a meeting with an "assessor" from SponsorAScholar.co.uk, Mark Lancaster. He explained that the level of remuneration students received depended on the sexual acts they agreed to engage in with their "sponsor." The student was told they would have to undergo a "practical assessment" in order to qualify.

Media coverage has focused on Lancaster, an IT consultant with links to the Ministry of Defence. Minister for Women Jo Swinson called for a police investigation and said that the government had pledged to "tackle those who have taken advantage of those who are forced into prostitution."

But it is the government that has forced some to turn to prostitution.

Annual UK student tuition fees rose to £9,000 in September 2012, a three-fold increase on the previous year. Swinson played down any connection between education cuts and this case, saying, "No eligible student has to pay for their tuition up-front. Loans are available to meet the full cost of tuition charges at publicly funded institutions."

UK students can apply for a £9,000 Tuition Fee Loan, as well as a £5,500 Maintenance Loan (£7,675 for London) for living costs. A means tested Maintenance Grant is available, but a student coming from a household earning £40,000 (£20,000 per parent for a two-parent household) would only receive £550 per year. Youth from poorer families receive a larger grant (£3,354 for a household earning anything less than £25,000), but their loan is reduced.

These are derisory figures. An NUS study has shown that, on average, students face a £8,556 (£8,112 for London) gap between the support available and the actual cost of living. This means that a student in London will leave university with debt of £50,000. On top of this, students would have to find an extra £8,556 per year just to subsist. With the under-21 minimum wage being just £4.98 per hour, students would have to work 34 hours a week all year round on top of their studies to meet the funding gap.

The sharp increase in the cost of rent in the UK is a significant contributor to the amount students need to find each year. The NUS/Unipol Accommodation Costs Survey showed that even rent in university-owned accommodation has all but doubled in the last 10 years, with a 97 percent rise in average rents from £59.17 in 2001/2002 to £117.67 in 2011/2012.

Private sector rents are even higher, with an average rent of £140 per week (£7,280 per year) rising to £157.48 per week (£8,189 per year) in the capital. The survey pointed to a sharply accelerating increase in average rents, up 25 percent across institutional, nominated and private halls in the three years since the previous NUS survey (2009/2010).

This situation is compounded by a national unemployment rate of 2.51 million—1 million among youth—where even minimum-wage jobs are hard to come by.

An NUS student survey revealed that 48 percent of full-time undergraduates were worried about not having enough money to cover basic living expenses, with a further 10 percent feeling unable to concentrate on their studies without "worrying about finances." More than half, 52 percent, reported receiving support from their families to meet the cost of living.

This economic situation has allowed prostitution agencies like SponsorAScholar to exploit vulnerable

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students. New research shows that the number of students engaged in sex work, including lap dancing, pole dancing, escorting and prostitution, has doubled over the last year, reaching 6 percent of the total.

"The economy of the sex industry is now heavily intertwined with higher education economy," said Dr. Ron Roberts, who suggests that each UK academic institution receives on average somewhere between £600,000 and £3 million in funds earned by its students in the sex industry.

In 2010 Roberts's research suggested that one in four students knew someone who had worked in the sex industry to fund their studies, up from just 3 percent in 1990.

The BBC reported the story of a 17-year-old sixth-form student who used escort work to fund her studies after the government withdrew the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in 2010.

Another historic indicator of economic misery is also on the rise. The *Guardian* reported that between 2007 and 2011, suicides amongst male higher education students rose by 38 percent, with the increase reaching 50 percent for female students. An NUS spokesperson commented that "finance and debt problems" piled "increasing pressures" on students, a situation made worse by the backdrop of cutbacks in university student support. When you are "paying that much for your education, coming out with a good mark matters even more", they added, compounding the anxiety felt by students.

Prostitution agencies speak of offering "financial help" that "won't impact on your studies". Their offer of £416 per hour, considered against a backdrop of endemic unemployment, makes it understandable that so many students are forced to turn to this avenue of revenue.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition is carrying out the biggest cuts to the education system since the 1950s, as part of a wider austerity agenda aimed at making the working class pay for the 2008 financial collapse. Appeals to morality, tougher legislation, calls for prosecution of the perpetrators or, in some cases, arguments in favour of sex work as "empowerment", are ultimately impotent in suggesting solutions to this problem.

August Bebel, whose seminal work *Woman and Socialism* in part dealt with the role of prostitution in modern and classical society, noted that some liberal commentators "faintly recognize that unfortunate social conditions, weighing heavily upon countless women, might be the chief cause why so many sell their bodies. *But they do not draw the conclusion that if this be the case, it becomes necessary to bring about different social conditions* " (emphasis in the original).

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality insists that the defence of education and living standards is impossible without the mobilization of the working class, students and youth in a struggle against capitalism and a fight for socialism.

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