

British trade union mounts witch-hunt based on accusations of “rape denial”

Julie Hyland
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The resolution passed by the UNISON trade union women’s conference denying what it terms “rape deniers” a public platform is a reactionary move underscoring the right-wing and anti-democratic character of identity politics.

The conference took place amid a major assault on working class living standards and social provision. Yet not a single concrete measure to beat back this offensive was adopted. Nor was a word said about the role of Britain’s major public sector union in facilitating the destruction of tens of thousands of public sector jobs and the ripping up of pension rights. Instead motion after motion eulogised the work conducted by UNISON in “gender-specific” areas.

The event was a set piece for the union bureaucracy and its apologists to conceal their hostility to the social concerns of working people behind the façade of women’s rights. This accounts for the motion passed overwhelmingly by conference, entitled, “Support rape victims not rape deniers”.

The resolution solidarises with the campaign led by the United States, Britain and Sweden against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on trumped-up accusations of sexual assault. It noted with obvious approval that the UK courts had “approved the extradition of Assange to Sweden to face allegations of rape and sexual assault”, but complained that “in public discourse around this high profile case, many prominent political voices have undermined and belittled rape victims”.

The motion cited George Galloway, Respect MP for Bradford West, for his defence of Assange as proof that “Rape culture is endemic in the UK”. In a podcast Galloway had alluded to the political nature of the charges against Assange and said that his actions, even if true as depicted by two women, “don’t constitute rape”.

For this, the motion urges that “UNISON spokespeople” be encouraged (!) to “refuse to share a platform with George Galloway”. It builds on the precedent set last year by decision of the Executive of the National Union of Students to bar Galloway from its platforms and the initial threat to do the same to the long-time leader of the Labour Party’s left

Tony Benn—also for defending Assange—before Benn abased himself before his critics.

UNISON’s motion goes further, pledging to “liaise with the [National Executive Committee], Labour Link, and other UNISON bodies to try and ensure that UNISON never offers a platform to any speakers who are rape deniers, and who blame and undermine rape victims, and that it never officially supports any event that does”.

The motion is as spurious as it is slanderous. Assange is the target of a frame-up, concocted by the Swedish authorities in league with Washington and London, whose purpose is to silence him and close down WikiLeaks because of their exposure of the criminal conspiracies of the US and its allies.

The allegations of sexual misconduct against Assange were made by two women who had sought out the WikiLeaks founder and engaged in consensual sex with him separately on several occasions, including after the alleged incidents that led to their complaints. The specific accusations—involving a torn condom and initiating sex while one of the women was asleep—only became allegations of rape after the intervention of politically motivated parties seeking a pseudo-legal pretext to extradite Assange to Sweden and his subsequent transfer to the US for prosecution on charges of espionage.

The pseudo-left and feminists behind the motion are as indifferent to the filthy manoeuvres of the imperialist powers as they are to the fact that Assange has not even been charged with an offence.

The motion was moved by Cath Elliott, a regional UNISON convenor and feminist activist who writes regularly for the *Liberal Conspiracy* blog and the *Guardian*.

Elliott states that she has “no idea whether Julian Assange is or is not guilty of committing a sex crime”. Nevertheless, she has made it her task to challenge what she dismisses as “the prevailing liberal left conspiracy theory narrative” that “Assange’s two accusers are part of some CIA inspired honey-trap and that the great man himself is the only victim here—a victim of some dark and covert plot”.

This “narrative”, she claims, somehow amounts to stating that “women who accuse men of rape are not to be believed, and that the rights of important men doing important work should trump a woman’s right to justice”.

Elliott’s statement speaks volumes as to the social and political interests that animate the layer of middle class feminists she represents. Just as supposed “humanitarian considerations” provide the means for various self-styled liberals, “lefts” and feminists to line up behind imperialist war, so too genuflections to “women’s rights” are the mechanism by which they seek to cover over these crimes and join the witch-hunt against Assange.

The wealth of evidence that Assange is the victim of a “dark and covert plot” is dismissed. The slaughter and devastation committed by the imperialist powers in Iraq doesn’t rate a mention, or the fact that the revival of neo-colonialism it heralded now extends to interventions against Libya, Syria and Mali—facilitated in no small part by the nobbling of Assange and WikiLeaks.

Elliott has argued that “it is the very antithesis of feminism to automatically assume that a man accused of sex crimes is innocent”.

This is a damning indictment of feminist politics. The cornerstone of democratic rights is the presumption of innocence. According to Elliot, however, this should not apply to allegations of “sex crimes”—where the accused should presumably be assumed guilty.

Why stop there? In every country the principle of innocent until proven guilty is under systematic assault—from Barack Obama’s policy of targeted assassination by drones to the UK’s imprisonment of “suspected” terrorists for years without trial.

Moreover, the criteria set down by the motion means that anyone can be framed for rape, vilified and persecuted—even in the absence of charges—while the accused and anyone who defends them should be prevented from publicly challenging such allegations on the grounds that this is “rape denial”!

There is more than a whiff of McCarthyism in both the tone and intent of the filthy resolution. It is targeted explicitly at what the resolution coyly describes as “men on the left” deemed responsible for reinforcing “negative attitudes about rape survivors” and propping “up sexism and misogyny”.

The implications were made clear at the UNISON conference when the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) was threatened that it could be next to be barred from platforms.

The SWP is characterised by its essential loyalty to the trade union apparatus. It has long promoted identity politics based on race, gender and sexual-preference as a counter-weight to class-based politics and has even lined up behind the campaign against Assange, demanding he go to Sweden

to stand trial.

But this is no longer enough for the ever rightward lurching Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

In the most cynical manner, allegations of sexual impropriety against a leading member of the SWP have been seized on by pro-Labour Party ideologues such as the warmonger Nick Cohen, Owen Jones, and blogs such as *Socialist Unity* to launch a scathing attack on “Leninism” and “Trotskyism” as the root cause of the SWP’s anti-democratic practices and proof of the futility of building any party separate from Labour and the trade unions.

They have found fertile ground for this campaign amongst various feminists and former and current members of the SWP and other pseudo-left groups.

The SWP’s argument that it would be a “serious mistake” to bar Galloway from union platforms as it would shut down discussion on his “disgraceful” remarks was used to place it beyond the pale.

Elliott has referred to an open letter from the SWP, signed by 500 of its members, defending their party as a “shit list”. At conference, she said the SWP’s real concern over the no-platform policy was “what will happen now that 500 of them have outed themselves as misogynists and rape deniers”.

Having been branded “misogynists” and “rape deniers”, the implication was that these 500 or so could potentially be barred from UNISON platforms if they don’t toe the mark. One can already imagine trade union bureaucrats demanding, “Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the ...?”



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