The Steubenville, Ohio rape case

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The Steubenville, Ohio rape case is a tragedy, which has been immeasurably worsened by the intervention of the American media, and in particular its so-called left elements. The combination of hysteria, sanctimony and vindictiveness is toxic.

It is impossible to know for certain what took place last August 11-12 in Steubenville at a series of parties. But that something callous, cruel and delinquent from the point of view of the juvenile legal system took place seems evident. A situation got out of control and a 16-year-old girl, apparently too drunk to know what was going on, was sexually abused, and that abuse was photographed and publicized.

Trent Mays, 17, and Ma'lik Richmond, 16, two Steubenville High School football players, were convicted of sexual assault on Sunday and sentenced to two years and one year in a juvenile correctional facility, respectively. They could both be detained until they are 21 and face the possibility of lifelong classification as sex offenders. When Judge Thomas Lipps announced his verdict, Richmond turned to his lawyer and said, "My life is over," before collapsing in tears.

The event is upsetting and horrific for all concerned. But it should not have been the occasion for splashing the names and faces of the two boys across the front pages of major newspapers and on television screens. A civilized society makes a distinction between adults and minors, and the treatment they receive at the hands of the legal system.

The entire event is horrible—for the girl who was abused, the boys whose lives are ruined, and the parents who must find some way to salvage what they can of their families. One can only feel disgust for the insensitivity with which these dreadful events are treated. There isn't a shred of humanity in the entire American establishment.

In fact, CNN anchor Candy Crowley and reporter Poppy Harlow have come under ferocious attack for exhibiting elemental human compassion for the defendants during their coverage of the verdict. Harlow commented on air, "It was incredibly emotional, incredibly difficult even for an outsider like me to watch what happened as these two young men that had such promising futures—star football players, very good students—we literally watched as, they believe, their life fell apart." Crowley made similar remarks.

A petition launched at Change.org demands that CNN apologize "for your disgustingly biased coverage. Further, we demand that you use your position as a premier news network to focus on changing rape culture in America. Devote an hour long, prime time segment to rape, its victims, what can be done to prevent it, and how to change the culture that gives rise to this violent crime."

The 16-year-old girl's family, and the girl herself, have shown far more compassion. The parents have come out against further charges being pressed by Ohio attorney general Mike DeWine, a Republican. The victim's lawyer Bob Fitzsimmons told the media, according to CNN, "that his client's mother also felt some measure of sympathy toward her daughter's assailants. 'I think she does forgive them and expressed that to the one defendant,' Fitzsimmons said. 'She prayed that things would be better for everybody.'"

What is a genuinely progressive and thoughtful response to the incident? In the first place, there is the context—of poverty, youth unemployment, industrial decay, social backwardness. The episode, in the end, reflects oppression.

Steubenville, Ohio is a rusting industrial town, once dominated by the steel industry, 40 miles west of Pittsburgh and 30 miles north of Wheeling, West Virginia. Its population declined from a high point of some 40,000 in the early 1940s to 19,000 in 2010. As of the 2000 census, the median income for the city was $26,516 and the per capita income was $17,830.

In Jefferson County, Ohio as a whole, approximately 19 percent of the total population and 28 percent of children subsist beneath the official poverty line. According to the director of Urban Mission Ministries in July 2012, 47,000 county residents had visited a food bank within the past year, in a county with 69,000 residents.

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The immense tensions generated by the social crisis find no progressive expression at this point. The young, often with bleak prospects, take out their anger and rage on all sorts of targets, including themselves. Drinking and drugs, which are rampant, play their part. Tragedies like the one in Steubenville last August have deep roots in the social and economic environment. Even if the facts supported a conviction, that would not lessen the responsibility of anyone interested in social progress to examine the context and conditions.

There was a time in America when such events, and even far more violent acts, provided the occasion for a probing examination of the conditions and culture out of which they emerged. It is not difficult to imagine how a Clarence Darrow, who defended the child murderers Leopold and Loeb in 1924, would have dealt with the Steubenville tragedy.

None of this is of any interest to the present-day pseudo-left moralizers and feminists. Among the worst offenders are the moral and political bankrupts of the International Socialist Organization and Socialistworker.org, who are only too happy to go with the media flow on the Steubenville affair. The ISO has managed to produce twice as many articles on the rape case as it has on Obama's drone assassination program, responsible for the deaths of thousands.

The target of the Socialistworker.org articles is not American capitalism or the social and cultural misery it has produced, but the defendants and the population of Steubenville. As Nicole Colson writes ("Guilty verdicts are only a start"), "the real story in Steubenville is how these young men could feel entitled to rape a young woman—and count on the support of many authority figures and adults in their community." Colson proceeds to solidarize herself with those raking CNN's Poppy Harlow and Candy Crowley over the coals for "speculating about the emotional trauma of the defendants when they were sentenced." Her piece is bloodthirsty.

Colson writes: "Of course, defense attorneys in a rape case consider it their job in providing an aggressive defense to call the victim—essentially—a liar and a drunken slut. But that attitude was reflected in much of the Steubenville community, which rallied behind the young men."

This is not in fact what the defense attorneys maintained. They appropriately raised legitimate questions about what actually transpired. According to Colson and the ISO, the accused have no right to a defense and the word of the alleged victim is to be taken on faith. There is not the slightest concern with democratic rights in Colson's article, nor any concern with what the Steubenville case says about the state of American capitalism. She and the editors of the *Socialist Worker* would derive considerable satisfaction if Mays and Richmond were destroyed, perhaps locked up for life.

Dave Zirin, the itinerant sports columnist of the "left," who writes for Socialistworker.org, the *Nation* and other publications and manages to say nothing insightful in any of them, tells his readers ("What caused Steubenville?") that the problem in Steubenville is a "rape culture," which is "a part of sports." This culture could be "destroyed with the active intervention of coaches who take violence against women seriously," citing the example of a coach who struck one of his young players for making a tasteless joke.

The appalling conditions of life are not the issue for Zirin either, or the fact that sports are seen by many as the only way out of poverty. He lectures the oppressed about their behavior, but the conditions of oppression are never seriously addressed.

War, poverty, the conditions of broad masses of the people barely raise their pulse rate. *Socialist Worker* likes nothing better than an opportunity to lay into the population for its supposedly hateful sexism, racism and so forth. A venomous petty bourgeois hostility to the working class is the subtext of every such piece.

Episodes such as the one in Steubenville and the manufactured public outrage that goes along with them inevitably strengthen the "law and order" forces, lead to new police powers and lend credibility to the politicians who posture as defenders of the victims. All of this will come into play and be used against the working class and against socialists, when mass opposition to the dictates of the corporate aristocracy erupts. The "left," which understands nothing and learns nothing, is fully complicit in this effort.

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