

Sixteen-year-olds recruited to British Army

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More than 1 in 10 new recruits to the British Army are just 16 years of age, according to figures released by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). It makes Britain one of the few countries in the world, and the only country in the European Union, to recruit child soldiers.

More than 1 in 4 of all new recruits are under age 18. This makes them too young to be sent into combat, according to amendments made by the Army following a public outcry at the time of the Kosovo war. Nonetheless, it is reported that at least 20 soldiers aged below 18 served in Iraq and Afghanistan “due to errors”, according to the *Independent*.

The newspaper said that there were more than 1,700 youth in the armed forces, mainly the Army, below voting age. “And the proportion of Army recruits aged just 16 has risen from 10 percent in 2012-13 to 13 percent in 2013-14. Many of them would have begun the enlistment process when they were 15, according to campaigners.”

Organisations such as Child Soldiers International and the Children’s Rights Alliance accuse the armed forces of deliberately targeting teenagers to overcome its recruitment crisis. Plans to create a 35,000-strong reservist force by 2018 are reported to be massively behind target.

The Army dismissed concerns. Colonel Richard Kemp, former commander of British forces in Afghanistan, was quoted by the *Independent* stating, “Some of the finest soldiers I commanded during my 30 years in the Army started their careers as juniors, enlisting at 16.” The approach “unquestionably boosts the quality and fighting effectiveness of the armed forces,” he said.

A significant factor in the rise of young, mainly male, soldiers is the lack of any decent job prospects. While the government boasted that the jobless rate had fallen slightly in January, by 63,000 to 2.33 million, or 7.2 percent, youth unemployment remains static at around

900,000 and has doubled under the coalition government, standing at 19.1 percent.

In addition to dire economic circumstances, the ruling elite are promoting the armed forces as part of the militarisation of British life.

The armed forces have highly glamorised advertising in cinemas and on television aimed at recruiting young people, especially. But they are also increasingly involved in education.

Recruitment stalls for Britain’s armed forces are a regular feature at university fresher fairs. In 2013 the armed forces had made 341 visits to universities across Britain to recruit students in the two years prior. Birmingham University led the way, with more than 20 recruitment visits, followed by Leeds (17) and Leicester (16).

The armed forces are increasingly involved in schools with younger-aged pupils. Armed Forces Day is on Saturday, June 28. The day before, schools are being encouraged to take part in a “Camo Day”, a non-uniform day in schools aimed at raising money for the military charity Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Families Association (SSAFA). “Wherever our Forces are based, schools are showing their support by joining in our simple dress-down day,” the promotional site states. Schools signing up will receive free fundraising kits, including teaching resources.

The government is also attempting to press ahead with plans for Military Academies and Military Free Schools. First floated in 2012 by the Department for Education, they are based on proposals by Respublica, a Conservative Party think tank supported by Prime Minister David Cameron.

Presented as a solution “to the social ills that became manifest” in the August 2011 riots in English cities, the plans were outlined in a document, “Military Academies: Tackling disadvantage, improving ethos and changing outcome.”

The ideal scenario is for teaching staff to have past or present experience with the armed forces, while the curriculum should emphasise discipline, and work in partnership between the MoD and the Department of Education (DfE).

In March, however, the government was forced to withdraw approval for one of the first Military Academies in Oldham, after the proposed Phoenix School failed to meet “rigorous criteria.”

Phoenix Free School, piloted by former teacher and military instructor Tom Burkard, was to have been run by former military personnel. Burkard justified the move by citing the “poor” quality of neighbouring schools and stressing that “discipline” would be the school’s “absolute first priority.”

The plans were opposed by Oldham Council as the area already has 1,000 surplus school places, while there were reports that the Phoenix Free School could not find qualified ex-Army staff.

Last year the DfE unveiled its “Troops to Teachers” (ITT) programme, which will allow ex-soldiers without undergraduate degrees to become teachers after two years of on-the-job training.

The aim is to fast-track Army veterans with the appropriate instructing qualifications to take up positions teaching in schools.

David Laws, the Education Minister, said that the scheme would bring “the military values of leadership, discipline, motivation and teamwork into the classroom” and that ex-soldiers would “inspire young people.”

The scheme is part of the DfE’s “Military Ethos in Schools” programme, which it states includes “bringing Armed Service leavers in as teachers or mentors through Troops to Teachers; opening a cadet unit within a school; or using the [alternative] provision of groups like SkillForce and Challenger Troop.”

The presence of the MoD’s Combined Cadet Force (CCF) is being expanded under the DfE initiative. The aim is to have 100 CCF’s in place in state schools by 2015, with 250 more targeted for the following years.

The militarisation of schooling is supported by the Labour Party, which has floated its own “Service Ethos” plans. In 2012, writing for *Policy Review*, Stephen Twigg, then Labour’s Education spokesman, claimed, “The Armed Forces can make an important contribution to the nation not just on the battlefield but

by embedding the standards and values they embody within our social fabric: responsibility, comradeship, hard work and a respect for public service. One way this can be achieved is through educational provision.”

This year marks 100 years since the outbreak of World War I. The first imperialist slaughter was to claim the lives of some 16 million people. Yet in Britain, the ruling elite, as elsewhere, is proposing that the anniversary of this catastrophe should be “celebrated”. Some £50 million has been allocated for “national commemorative events”, to mark what Cameron claimed was Britain’s “national spirit.”

This is being accompanied by a deliberate attempt to rewrite the history of the war, focussing on schools. This centres on claims that the purpose of marking World War I is not to reflect on the horror and senselessness of war, but to point to its necessity, and even glory. Once again, British capitalism can offer the younger generation only the “opportunity” of being used as cannon fodder in its predatory wars of aggression.



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