Australian feminists deride public sympathy for family murder-suicide victims

Patrick Kelly, Linda Tenenbaum
29 February 2016

Last month, 34-year-old Damien Little shot his two sons, Koda, four, and Hunter, nine months, with a rifle and then drove his car off a wharf and drowned himself. The murder-suicide in the South Australian town of Port Lincoln was met with an outpouring of public grief and sympathy from ordinary people, in both the local community and throughout Australia.

Melissa Little, Damien's wife, issued a moving statement just three days after losing her husband and two little boys: "Damien valued and appreciated our close-knit family, he put us first, we were his whole world. He spent every hour providing quality time and teaching the boys how to live and grow. My wish is for Damien to be remembered as a well-respected and valued member of our family and our community."

Residents of Port Lincoln rallied to the family, leaving flowers and other commemorative mementos at the wharf. An online fund-raising appeal for Melissa has collected more than $62,000. More than 600 people attended the funeral service for Damien, Koda, and Hunter; Melissa had written three poems, one for each of the deceased, and these were handed to each mourner. At the conclusion of the service, 100 white, yellow and blue balloons were released—in the colours of the Lincoln South Football Club where Damien had been an active player and coach.

This response, accompanied by numerous online expressions of sympathy and solidarity, is yet another indication of a significant political shift to the left among layers of workers and youth. In stark contrast to the sustained "law and order" propaganda incessantly promoted by the political and media establishment, and focussed on the mantras of "individual responsibility" and the "depraved acts" of "evil" individuals, many ordinary people interpreted Damien Little's actions as the tragic consequence of a complex interaction between severe mental illness and a rapidly escalating social crisis.

This attitude, however, was not shared by the various purveyors of feminism, who could not conceal their outrage. According to them the reported rise in domestic violence over the past few years is the sole responsibility of "men." To reinforce this claim, "White Ribbon Day" has become an annual feminist-inspired event, where "men" are supposed to wear white ribbons and make individual statements declaring their commitment to "non-violence" against women.

Nina Funnell wrote a vicious piece on multi-millionaire businesswoman Mia Freedman's *mamamia* website, titled, "Damien Little murdered his two boys. So why are we calling him a 'top bloke'?" Denouncing the deceased, and his family's public appeals for respect and sympathy, she declared: "Because we live in a society where women and children are still seen as an extension of the men they are related to, and because women and children are often expected to passively absorb the violent outbursts of the men they 'belong' to, we're being told not to say anything critical about this man's choices."

Melbourne *Age* commentator Clementine Ford (who in 2013 launched "Women for Gillard" on behalf of the former Labor prime minister) insisted that what had happened was a "criminal act." She continued: "The choice to perpetrate violence is exactly that—a choice," adding that "while men's mental health is an important issue, it's also a distraction."

Former federal independent parliamentarian and self-styled "left" Phil Cleary also weighed in, denouncing the tributes to Damien Little by his family and friends as "disgusting."

That the outpouring of public solidarity has provoked such an angry response from feminist commentators provides a revealing glimpse into the political role of identity politics. Its aim is to sow divisions within the working class by elevating utterly secondary characteristics, such as gender, race, skin colour, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., above the fundamental, objective divisions in society, based on class. Thus the feminists attack those solidarising with Little and his supporters as virtual accomplices of his violent act.

Theirs is a class response to the Little family's tragedy. Distant from and hostile to the working class, the professional feminist milieu is part of a wealthy upper-middle class layer that has become, over the past decades, firmly entrenched within the political, media, and corporate establishment. It was elevated to national prominence, above all, during former Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard's term in office (2010–2013)—and has remained there ever since.

Gillard carefully cultivated her feminist supporters as hostility towards her government escalated throughout the working class. They enthusiastically backed her Labor-Greens

© World Socialist Web Site

coalition as it launched its ruthless assaults on refugees, welfare recipients, Aborigines, and other oppressed layers of workers and young people, and supported her unconditional alignment with US preparations for war against China.

Tied to the wealthiest layers of society by a million strings, the careers and privileges of Gillard's feminist constituency have advanced in inverse proportion to the fate of the working class. In other words, the rise and rise of stock markets, investment property returns, boardroom remunerations and corporate profits over the past two and a half decades has taken place at the direct expense of the living conditions of ordinary working people. For them, job security has become a thing of the past, while wages, for the first time since World War II are actually declining. Public health, education, aged care and other social programs have been gutted, creating an ongoing social nightmare for millions of working-class families.

The details of Damien Little's circumstances underscore the extent of the social chasm separating the lives of the upper-middle class feminists from those of their working-class counterparts.

Damien married Melissa, a local primary school teacher and the mother of his two children, in 2007. Like millions of other working-class Australians affected by three decades of deindustrialisation and "free market" economic reforms, Damien struggled to find regular employment. He worked as a labourer, truck driver and carpet layer. At the time of his death, he was running a small carpet and furniture cleaning business.

The Littles had spent the previous two years living in a shed on Damien's family property, while they saved money to build their own home. Under significant stress, Damien's mental health was rapidly deteriorating. His older brother, Shannon, reported that Damien had "seriously struggled" with depression for two to three years, but refused to seek medical assistance. "He wasn't in his right mind," Shannon told the *Daily Mail*. "He was really struggling over the past few years, but he didn't want to appear weak… We realised something was seriously wrong a few months ago. That's when it all really hit home. I just wish he had got the help he needed."

Damien's father, a retired truck driver and farmer, noted that his son had "spiralled into a dark place." His mother, Sue, told the Adelaide *Advertiser* that he had not been coping with the pressures. "He was very particular about everything he did," she explained. "I think he wanted to be perfect—he wanted to be a perfect father and husband. He wanted to do everything right. He was very hard on himself. He wanted to live a perfect life."

A "perfect life"—or even a tolerable one—has become a chimera for countless working people. Daily life for millions is comprised of a frenetic struggle to keep one's head above water amid escalating costs of living and mounting household debt. Many of the most vulnerable and sensitive succumb to family and/or personal breakdown and collapse.

As in other advanced capitalist economies, Australian society is wracked by a mental health epidemic. According to a 2007 Australian Bureau of Statistics survey, 45 percent of people aged 16–85 years (7.3 million people) had, at some point in their lifetime, experienced a mental disorder. More than 20 percent of those surveyed reported suffering a mental disorder within the previous 12 months. The figures are undoubtedly worse now, with ordinary workers and their families coming under even greater stresses in the years since the 2008 global financial crisis. The telephone crisis service Lifeline has reported that 2015 was the busiest in its 52-year history, receiving more than one million requests for help.

Little and his two sons died just days after the South Australian Labor government admitted that it had failed to meet its pledge of ensuring that by 2016 no mental health patient would spend more than 24 hours in a hospital emergency department. Half of all mental health facilities in the state are currently under a "code white," meaning that no other patients can be admitted.

Various Labor, Liberal, and Green politicians pay occasional lip service to the crisis, while doing nothing to invest the resources necessary to provide publicly funded and freely accessible mental health services for all who need them. Suicide is now the leading cause of death for Australians aged 15 to 44, and is the leading cause of premature death.

Invoking the reactionary "individual responsibility" and "evil men" mantras of the feminist lobby cannot explain why Damien Little killed himself and his two boys. Any genuine understanding requires, on the contrary, a critical analysis of the wider social context—the global crisis of the capitalist profit system—out of which his actions arose. The purpose of identity politics in general, and feminism in particular, is precisely to demonise and suppress such a response.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site