

British Army targets working-class schoolchildren for recruitment

Alice Summers
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The British Army recently launched a recruitment campaign that specifically targets working-class youth. Blandly named “This is belonging,” the campaign identifies its main audience as economically deprived young people, including adolescents only 16 years of age.

A briefing document section titled “Target audience” spells out that the army is primarily aiming to recruit 16-24 year olds in the C2DE sociological category. The C2DE category refers to the lowest three economic groupings, which range from skilled manual workers through to unskilled labour and the unemployed. The document specifies that it is chiefly targeting those who come from families with an annual household income of less than £10,000 (\$US 13,100), meaning that many of the children targeted live below the poverty line.

Although the campaign is UK-wide, the army document indicates that there are “up-weights” to cities in the North of England and in the West Midlands, such as Manchester, Sheffield and Birmingham. Urban centres such as these tend to have high rates of youth unemployment, at 22.8, 19.4 and 22.5 percent respectively, compared to a UK average of 14.4 percent (figures from August 2016).

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Rachel Taylor, director of programmes at Child Soldiers International, condemned the army’s recruitment drive for targeting “the youngest and most vulnerable people for its most dangerous roles. Many children in these towns and cities have grown-up in communities with little economic capital or career opportunities and are easy targets for Army recruiters who are desperate to fill recruitment shortfalls.”

The fact that the armed forces are “preying on communities where unemployment and social deprivation is high ... is a brazen, calculated policy to recruit 16- and 17-year-olds who have few options in life for dangerous infantry jobs that others do not want.”

The “This is belonging” campaign uses a series of short video clips showing staged scenes of young soldiers undergoing training or participating in mock combat situations, attempting to present the armed forces as a supportive, family environment. These videos were shown on social media, on television and in cinemas.

The army describes “This is belonging” as “a new inspirational and motivating creative campaign” to convey the message that recruits would be joining “a brotherhood and sisterhood formed of unbreakable bonds which ... will accept you for you.”

Labelling these videos as “cleverly engineered propaganda which glamorises army life,” Taylor insisted that “the reality could not be more different.”

“Morale among the armed forces is plummeting. Forty percent of recruits are actively looking for other employment, while issues of bullying and abuse are commonplace, especially for the 24 percent of recruits who sign up under the age of 18.”

ForcesWatch, a non-profit organisation that scrutinises military recruitment practices, also criticised the army for targeting young people and for “appealing to the adolescent child’s need to belong.” The organisation argued that the army “have latched onto a very popular recruitment tool, powerful in particular among those who feel isolated or marginalised, or who have a sense of non-belonging and potentially low self-esteem.”

The UK is the only country in Europe, and one of only a handful in the world, that allows the recruitment of minors. The enlistment process into the armed forces can begin at 15 years and seven months, although training does not start until the child has reached 16 and these recruits cannot be deployed into active service until they reach 18 years.

According to a report by *Medact*, a non-profit organisation of health professionals, there are serious long-term consequences of child recruitment by the army. The

study showed that these young recruits are more likely to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, alcohol abuse and self-harm after leaving the army. Male under-20 recruits have a 64 percent higher risk of suicide than their adult civilian peers and have a higher chance of being wounded or killed during their career in the armed forces.

The report concluded that military recruitment techniques “[take] advantage of adolescent cognitive and psychological vulnerabilities” and that current child recruitment practices “do not meet the criteria for full and informed consent.”

The UK government has actively promoted army recruitment within schools, with Defence Secretary Michael Fallon announcing the creation of 150 new cadet units in schools last October. There are now more than 300 cadet units across UK schools, in which children as young as 12 are taught battle planning, weapon use and military discipline.

According to *ForcesWatch*, the military make thousands of visits to UK schools and colleges each year and even to primary schools and nurseries. These visits include recruitment stalls at careers fairs, curriculum and career-related activities, sessions with staff members and interviews for pre-recruitment courses at army bases, among other things.

Some schools are either sponsored by or have partnerships with the armed forces or arms industry.

ForcesWatch coordinator Emma Sangster rejected the Ministry of Defence claim that the army does not directly recruit within schools. She told the *Guardian*: “Recruitment is a process, it’s not a single event.” During visits to school, armed forces recruiters, “drip feed things of interest to children of school age. They sanitise what conflict involves, and also glamorise it. They focus on adventure, which young people are desperate for.”

The British state is attempting to indoctrinate and prepare the next generation of working-class youth to be cannon fodder in their imperialist wars abroad. This is confirmed by the analysis of Veterans for Peace (VFP). In its report, “The First Ambush? Effects of army training and employment,” VFP asserts that British Army policy is to “channel the youngest recruits and those from poorer backgrounds into the infantry, which uses the most coercive training methods ... [and] carries the greatest risks in war...

“To ensure that recruits will follow all orders and kill their opponents in war, army training indoctrinates unconditional obedience, stimulates aggression and antagonism, overpowers a healthy person’s inhibition to

killing, and dehumanises the opponent in the recruit’s imagination.”

The VFP report notes that recruitment policy is rooted in class divisions, with army recruiters “creaming off” high-achieving adults from English universities to become future officers, while “dredging” poorer areas to fill the lower ranks with working-class youth whose lives are seen by the ruling elite as more dispensable.

This recruitment drive and the militarisation of education comes in the context of the escalation of British and NATO operations in the Middle East and on Russia’s borders, with the British Army currently deployed in some capacity in over 80 countries across the world.

It is not just within Britain that the militarisation of social life is taking place. In 2011, the German Bundeswehr began recruiting in schools and universities as part of a broader drive by the Defence Ministry to recruit thousands of new soldiers. Last year, the Swedish Parliament voted to bring back conscription and French President Emmanuel Macron and his supposedly “left” opponent Jean-Luc Mélenchon each included the return of the draft as an electoral promise.

More than 75 years after the outbreak of World War II, ruling elites across the world are again seeking to create powerful armies able to enforce their geostrategic and economic interests through war. A century after the Russian Revolution of 1917, the international working class is once again confronted with the necessity of building a revolutionary socialist and internationalist movement in order to prevent the descent into a catastrophic world war.



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