

Divisive “rape culture” campaign launched against UK schools

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If the Conservative government, media and teaching unions are to be believed, the main issue facing Britain’s schools is ... “rape culture”. So pervasive is this deemed to be that the government has ordered an inquiry, police have begun collecting “evidence”, and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) has been given powers to conduct “safeguarding inspections”.

Based on anonymous testimonies published on the Everyone’s Invited website—founded last June by former private school girl, Soma Sara—schools are said to be rife with misogyny, sexual harassment and predatory males, and are even accused of enabling and concealing sexual violence.

Claims of an endemic “rape culture” are made despite only a tiny minority of the “testimonies” gathered alleging rape. Most involve unwanted attention, the exchange of nude images or varying degrees of “touching”, mostly historic. And despite schools being cited as the culprit, few of the alleged incidents took place in school but rather at private parties or other locations.

The claims are anonymous and cannot be verified, which is of a piece with the charge of “rape culture” itself, which is defined as “all the ways that different forms of aggressive and violent sexual behaviour are normalised, encouraged and even admired by society.”

In contrast to the wall-to-wall media coverage given over to Everyone’s Invited, the real crisis in education goes largely unmentioned. The policy of “herd immunity,” adopted by governments the world over in response to the global Covid-19 pandemic, has cost the lives of more than 2.95 million people, 150,000 of them in Britain. Even so, Prime Minister Boris Johnson insists it is “not the right time” to convene an inquiry into the Covid catastrophe.

Schools have been at the frontline of this reckless indifference to life as the efforts to keep education facilities open—in order to force parents into unsafe

workplaces—has directly facilitated the spread of infections. Between March last year and January 2021 in England alone, at least 540 education staff died from Covid. Ten million children and young people have seen their education disrupted, with untold numbers having to self-isolate while help promised to those without access to the internet or laptops has failed to materialise. As a result, 95 percent of educators surveyed fear for their wellbeing, and more than one-third say they intend to quit the profession. As for those they teach, young people face a seemingly unending public health emergency, accompanied by rising unemployment, homelessness, poverty and an explosion of militarism.

Why then is it that a ruling elite so homicidally indifferent to a deadly pandemic is so moved to action over a supposed “rape culture”?

The description of these events as a #MeToo moment for schools must sound alarm bells. For years now an internecine gender war has been underway in the upper echelons of society to oust males (mainly white) from the top posts in the media, entertainment industry and academic world. Trampling over the presumption of innocence, generally unsubstantiated claims have been enough to destroy lives, careers and reputations.

For all the talk of a “rape culture”, this campaign has relied for its success on widespread public revulsion at sexual violence. Especially pernicious is the disorientation and confusion it has created, and an (intended) fractiousness in relations between the sexes.

That schools, where young people make most of their formative experiences with relationships and sexual boundaries while navigating their way from puberty to adulthood, have been impacted is hardly surprising. But this campaign has absolutely nothing to do with helping young people through this minefield; neither the girls in whose name it is conducted and especially not boys who are the target.

As the WSWS noted, none of the proponents of identity politics were in anyway prepared for the pandemic and its consequences. “Out of self-interest, which has appreciably narrowed their outlook, and in their self-deluded state, none of them could remotely imagine a cataclysm of the dimensions of the coronavirus crisis developing in a system they regarded as free of acute contradictions and, for all intents and purposes, everlasting.”

For a time, the #MeToo movement went quiet. Now it is back with a vengeance, and for the same self-serving and grasping purpose. Just as governments are utilising the pandemic to restructure economic relations ever more directly in the interests of the super-rich, the “rape culture” myth is being used to legitimise a dog-eat-dog struggle for position, primarily within the upper middle class, and to strengthen the repressive powers of the state.

It is not accidental that most of the Everyone's Invited testimonies centre on private schools, particularly the most prestigious. Just 6 percent of pupils attend private schools, which are overwhelmingly the preserve of the wealthy. Their significant funds not only guarantee a standard of education unavailable to the remaining 93 percent; they are the gateway to the top universities, corporate boardrooms and state power. Competition for entry and within these institutions is immense, which may account for the demand by some “survivors” to increase the sixth form ratio to admit more girls.

State schools have nonetheless been dragged into this filthy campaign. At least one impulse here is the government's new guidance for all schools to integrate Relationship and Sex Education into the curriculum from year 7 to 13. It is the first time that sex education will be compulsory across all schools, and that LGBTQ relationships will be taught. Some £6 million had already been set aside for “training and support providers”. Helpfully, in its template letter of protest, Everyone's Invited names its preferred providers as the “School of Sexuality Education & Bold Voices” due to their “intersectional, feminist, non-binary and sex positive” approach.

Another impulse is legitimising greater discipline, regulation and punishments in working class schools. That is why the campaign has the backing of such right-wing thinktanks as the Centre for Social Justice, former Tory Home Secretary and arch-Thatcherite Savid Javid, and Katharine Birbalsingh, who promotes the return of “traditional values” in education.

Add to the mix support for single-sex schools that unites

petty bourgeois “activist” Natasha Walter and *Telegraph* columnist Annabel Heseltine, daughter of Lord Heseltine, and the reactionary circle is almost complete.

The final link is supplied by the trade unions and the pseudo-left groups, which have all lined up behind the “rape culture” provocation. The annual conference of the National Education Union (NEU) last week charged that sexism “stalks the corridors and classrooms” and demanded the government put in place “robust sexual harassment and abuse policies.” Nothing was said as regards the desperate need for Covid-19 safety measures.

The Stalinist *Morning Star*, promoting a Labour Party meeting on “the socialist response to violence against women”, cast all men as potential rapists, asserting that “fear of violence by men is an everyday presence for most women”.

The Socialist Party asserts that what is urgently required is a “trade union and student-led inquiry into the true extent of sexual harassment and violence” in education, that could transform “reporting procedures,” scrutinise implementation and ensure they “are properly enforced in practice.”

In support, one of its members revealingly explains how “the more insidious instances [of sexual harassment] are usually from guys you actually have an initial attraction to. There are long-term mental health effects to this type of sexual abuse. I personally ended up in a situation at a party. I still find myself unsure whether the incident actually qualifies as sexual abuse, since I was a willing participant...”

The “rape culture” campaign is anti-democratic and misanthropic. Its injection into schools will prove immensely damaging. Calls by the unions and pseudo-left for it to be “properly enforced” makes clear their support for punitive state intervention, including openly authoritarian measures, in the name of “progressive” values.



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