

A comment on the viral TikTok “Devious Licks” trend

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“Devious Licks,” a recent trend on the social media platform TikTok, involves students in the US and elsewhere posting videos of either stolen school property or vandalized school bathrooms, or both. A “lick” in this context is another term for something stolen.

The phenomenon, a form of backward and anti-social protest, no doubt reflects the anger and confusion of a portion of young people under conditions of a deadly pandemic and general political instability and crisis.

The “Devious Licks” trend began in September as videos of students having stolen personal protective equipment (PPE) from school—such as masks, hand sanitizer and tissues—were posted on social media. One student, for example, posted a video of himself unzipping his backpack and pulling out a hand sanitizer dispenser with the caption, “only a month into school and got this absolute devious lick.” In two days, the video was viewed over seven million times.

Hundreds of copycat TikTok videos were posted in response, many trying to outdo the previous ones. Videos of students having stolen a microscope, computer or school street signage each reached two to three million views in under 24 hours. In addition, there have been multiple videos of bathrooms vandalized, with stall doors, mirrors, soap dispensers, sinks, toilets or urinals removed, broken or thrown across the room.

The videos have generated an uproar in the media, cries for more severe punishment for those involved and the demand by politicians and school district officials that TikTok be “held accountable” and greater censorship imposed on the platform. School districts in nearly all 50 US states, plus locations in Canada and the UK, have reported being “hit” by the trend.

Districts have responded by suspending and expelling students and imposing heightened security measures, including closing public restrooms for days at a time, tracking and limiting student restroom breaks and installing more cameras on campuses, especially near bathroom entrances. In addition, authorities have fined and charged

numerous students, with arrests coming in various parts of the country.

Students have also posted videos bringing to light the various security measures and responses by school officials. Videos on TikTok record angry messages from school administrators over loudspeakers threatening criminal charges or offering \$100-\$500 cash rewards to any student who turns informant. One student posted a video of a campus police officer entering a classroom to perform a random bag search to find any stolen items.

After two weeks of the trend gaining traction, TikTok responded in mid-September by deleting accounts and videos, as well as redirecting related hashtags to their community guidelines with the message, “We expect our community to create responsibly—online and IRL [in real life]. We’re removing content and redirecting hashtags and search results to our Community Guidelines to discourage such behavior. Please be kind to your schools and teachers.”

In mid-September, US Senator Richard Blumenthal (Democrat from Connecticut) wrote a letter to TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew urging the platform to ban videos, users and hashtags related to the trend. Blumenthal, one of the richest individuals in Congress, has organized an upcoming hearing to discuss the impact of social media on youth.

There is nothing remotely progressive about the “Devious Licks” videos or the acts of theft and vandalism. This will not stop some on the pseudo-left from attempting to endow such activities with an incipient “anti-capitalist ethos.” In April, *Protean*, an online journal produced by a self-proclaimed “leftist media collective,” carried an article, “Shoplifting Communities: Sharing Tactics and Anti-Corporate Principles,” which noted that “Shoplifting has risen dramatically since the pandemic began.” The article points to one “decentralized anarchist collective” that promotes “scamming and shoplifting as a response to the injustices of capitalism.”

This is reactionary nonsense, which only plays into the hands of the authorities and the police.

The “Devious Licks” videos and the theft of PPE and

other materials are not actions aimed at mobilizing students against the present conditions. On the contrary, they reflect to a considerable extent the pessimism and disorientation of those carrying out the various thefts. The actions may also express skepticism in regard to measures taken to mitigate the pandemic by those who have been influenced by the right-wing media campaign against lockdowns and masking, or by sentiments articulated by their parents.

There isn't a hint in the "Devious Licks" trend of any political ideology. However, is there the possibility of anarchistic moods developing among the youth in the US? Absolutely, given the repulsive state of political life, dominated by two parties of big business, profits, greed and war. The official atmosphere communicates itself to young people, generating alienation, bitterness, anger and even individualistic, semi-terroristic moods.

Blumenthal's actions reveal how the ruling elite will use such episodes to step up attacks on free speech and intensify the campaign for "law and order." They equally reveal the extreme sensitivity of the ruling elite to these developments. It intensely fears the youth and anticipates social explosions. The powers that be will move swiftly to suppress any hint of opposition from young people.

The possibility of high school and college students and others utilizing social media to engage in mass opposition terrifies the establishment. The growing outrage of the youth is one of the most explosive components of the political situation in the US at present.

Young people have been immensely affected by the traumatic and bewildering events of the past year and a half—the disaster of the pandemic as a whole, including the deaths of relatives and friends; the quarantining and the recurring outbreaks; the back and forth between online and in-person instruction; the battles over masks and vaccines; the bombardment of poorly executed and inadequate mitigation measures; the lack of a scientific approach to containment. What long- and short-term impact is all this having?

In September the number of reported COVID cases among children 0-17 hit its peak at 251,781 in the week ending September 8. Since schools began reopening throughout the US in late July, more than 1,772,578 children have officially tested positive and 171 have died from COVID-19, while at least 5.8 million young people have been infected and 520 have died from the virus since the start of the pandemic, according to data from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Despite such terrible numbers, the bipartisan, teachers union-backed campaign to reopen schools and keep them open continues unabated. Students have been thrown into the same crowded and dilapidated classrooms with poor ventilation as before the pandemic. Schools lack even

adequate mitigation measures such as robust testing and contact tracing, low levels of community transmission, high-quality ventilation, social distancing, masks, etc.

Many youth must be asking, for what were all the sacrifices made? What is the purpose of PPE mandates as the virus continues to spread unchecked? They confront a torrent of contradictions and lies, COVID rules and expectations in school, as well as major disagreements in districts and broader communities over measures such as mask mandates and vaccination. Meanwhile the ruling class and its media outlets pour out claims to the effect that we must learn to live with the virus and accept hundreds of thousands more deaths.

School reopenings following limited lockdowns have resulted in more infections and death and have not eased the physical or psychological suffering. While anger among youth over the current conditions is widespread, the "Devious Licks" phenomenon on TikTok does not reflect the thoughts and feelings of the majority of students, who are appalled by the destruction of their schools and the thefts often directed at teachers. In fact, the majority of students are angry at the perpetrators who have caused a repressive backlash, the crackdown and the surveillance measures that have been unfairly imposed on entire student bodies. Additionally, many staff and students are upset about the increased workload and stress this has caused an already overworked and short-staffed custodial workforce.

Despite the attempts to normalize death and suffering, wide layers of young people want to fight for their future. They want a world free of the deadly pandemic that is exacerbating all the ills of capitalism. They want a world that will be habitable for the future generations and free of the threat of climate change. The eradication of COVID-19 is possible and must be fought for. It is the same fight for a world free of social inequality, repression and war. This can only be achieved through the building of an international revolutionary socialist movement.



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