The militarization of US high schools

At the Ready: Texas high schoolers taught "how to handcuff, how to lift fingerprints … how to do verbal commands and to use force"

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More than 900 high schools in Texas offer paramilitary law enforcement classes. Adolescents between 14 and 18 take part in programs that train them in police repression.

This ominous reality is documented in *At the Ready* by Texas-based director and cinematographer, Maisie Crow. Screened at the Sundance film festival this year, the film was shot in 2018 and 2019 at Horizon High School in El Paso, Texas, home to one of the region's largest law enforcement education programs. In this public institution, students are groomed to become police officers and border patrol agents for the notoriously brutal BORTAC unit. El Paso is the biggest city on the US-Mexico border, with a large immigrant and Mexican-American population.

As Crow's film points out, law enforcement is one of the few career paths in El Paso that offers wages comparable to the national average. Salaries start at around $40,000 a year for jobs often not requiring a college degree.

At the Ready opens as a column of innocuous yellow school buses rolls by a group of teens sporting military gear and lining up in formation. An authoritative voice shouts: "Here's the schedule: active shooter at 12; hostage negotiations at 1:30; drug raid at 2:30." Riot helmets and war fatigues make up the awkwardly fitting attire. The atmosphere is meant to be realistically intimidating.

In the classroom, one of the instructors, a former cop, explains that his charges "will learn about basics: how to handcuff; how to lift fingerprints; how to do traffic stops; how to do verbal commands and to use force and it's going to be paramilitary style." A supporter of fascistic Texas Senator Ted Cruz, this "educator" repeatedly uses the phrase "Light 'em up!" to describe how the students, with their plastic guns drawn, should expect to confront a suspect.

Recruitment into a "criminal justice club" begins with a slick video advertisement making false claims about the program's supposedly humanitarian purpose. A pro-police Blue Lives Matter flag hangs on the club's wall and also appears on the students' uniform vests.

Director Crow focuses on three Latinix subjects: Cristina, whose family supports her career choice largely because of the pay; Cesar, whose father was deported on drug charges to Juarez, Mexico; and Kassy, who after the film became Mason, a transgender male. Kassy is a lonely highschooler whose divorced parents have little time for her. Enthusiasm for the club, something of a surrogate family for Kassy, turns to disillusionment due to the homophobic character of the program and its propagandists.

At one point Cristina tries to justify her decision to continue with the training: "Being Latino and living in the border city, civilians see us as the enemy, and they don't see the good we do for the community. We provide gifts for low-income families for Christmas and turkeys for Thanksgiving. Yet they see us as family wreckers. I've been yelled at, cursed at, spit on and punched at just because of what I do." No surprises there.

The film's drama plays out against images of President Donald Trump spewing his xenophobic filth. While a caravan of thousands of refugees escaping desperate poverty and rampant violence in Central America makes its way toward the American border, Trump rants that the miles-long convoy is creating a "national emergency…This is an invasion of our Country—and our

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Military is waiting for you!”

Kassy refuses to join a club debate because of references to refugees as “pests.”

Cristina is shown watching a video of children being separated from their parents at the border. (More than 5,500 migrant families were pulled apart at the Southwestern border beginning in 2017, wrote the *New York Times* in a July 2021 article.)

Clearly disturbed, she responds: “The door opens from the processing center, and there’s like 7-year-olds, 8-year-olds. And they’re just walking there. And they look at us. And we’re like, oh, my God. Like, we thought it would be like adults or something, and no, it was like minors. We were really shocked because they were there because they were chasing a dream. So that’s, like, one thing I don’t like to just know that I’m cutting their dreams off.”

Intermittently, the camera captures El Paso’s poverty stricken neighborhoods and overall blight.

In an interview with NPR, director Crow explains that she was at a high school “on the border near Laredo, Texas. And while I was there, I saw students running down the hallway with the red fake guns that you see in the film, and I was very taken aback and started asking, you know, what these kids were doing. And it was the law enforcement program at the high school.”

Crow points out that the students were “learning how to do felony traffic stops, how to do drug raids, how to execute warrants for arrest, how to do hostage negotiations, how to take down active shooters. They’re really learning the range of things that law enforcement officers are training to deal with.”

In the movie’s press notes, the filmmaker voices dismay at seeing the effects “of encroaching paramilitarization. In the 100-mile radius from the border, where law-enforcement agencies operate with near impunity, it is not uncommon to come across immigration checkpoints, surveillance blimps and helicopters working from the air. Not to mention local police, state troopers, sheriffs, Texas Rangers, ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] officers and CBP [Customs and Border Protection] agents that dot the highways, surveilling communities.”

“As paramilitarization permeates the border, its reach is now extending to Texas’ public schools,” she adds. Crow also asserts that criminal justice programs grew in Texas after the state legislature passed House Bill 5, a law that put more vocational training programs in high school classrooms. Moreover, she wondered “how his [Trump’s] rhetoric and divisive nature might impact those in their most formative years.”

Much of the material here is striking and disturbing. It would have been interesting if Crow had spoken to non-participants and probed what they thought about these blatant police-military exercises in their school.

The “militarization” of high schools in the US is proceeding along two lines: first, the transformation of schools into virtual fortresses, flooded with weapons, armed guards and other security measures, in the supposed name of fighting crime and preventing shooting incidents; second, the introduction of programs such as the one in Texas to push working class and impoverished young people toward the police or military.

As the WSWS has noted, nearly every school system in the US has some sort of relationship with local police forces, with cops assigned to schools often designated as “school resource officers.” While police officers are broadly distributed throughout public schools, they are especially prominent in working class neighborhoods with lower incomes. Coinciding with the militarization of schools, resources for students have been largely cut or eliminated.

The school militarization goes hand in hand with ideological indoctrination. The American media loves to decry the “brainwashing” that goes on under any government of which Washington disapproves. What is the Texas program and others like it? They are intended to build up forces among young people dedicated to “free enterprise” and the American “way of life” and generally loyal to the political and status quo. The sinister role of such paramilitary “youth movements” in the past hardly has to be emphasized.

However, whatever the authorities may think, the youth are essentially rebellious and hostile to the system, including the youth in Texas. Some 60,000 people marched in Houston in 2020 in protest against the police murder of George Floyd. Other significant protests occurred in Austin, Dallas, San Antonio and Fort Worth; all in all, 45 Texas cities witnessed rallies or marches. No wonder then that the fundamental attitude of the establishment toward young people is one that combines fear and hostility.

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