

Defend Harvard professor John Comaroff against the right-wing witch-hunt!

Socialist Equality Party (US), International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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The Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality condemn the vicious witch-hunt being waged against Harvard anthropology professor John Comaroff. This shameful campaign reached new heights Tuesday when concerted efforts were made to prevent Comaroff from teaching. Provocations were organized both inside and outside the classroom.

Disgracefully, the campaign is being led by Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU)-UAW Local 5118, which is demanding that Comaroff be dismissed. The crowd organized by Local 5118, the same local that sold out the October 2021 strike by graduate students, chanted: “Professors who sexually harass their students shouldn’t be allowed to teach in peace!” “Professors who harass shouldn’t be in class!”

There is nothing to the “case” against Comaroff, and there never has been. It is based entirely on unsubstantiated allegations, gossip and innuendo.

Comaroff, born in Cape Town to parents of Eastern European Jewish extraction, grew up under and developed as a left-wing opponent of apartheid. He and his wife Jean taught for decades at the University of Chicago before coming to Harvard. He is the author of dozens of books on African society, globalization, ethnicity, class and inequality. Comaroff was voted one of Harvard’s favorite professors by the Class of 2019 “in recognition of [his] impact on the senior class’s Harvard experience” (Class of 2019’s Yearbook).

The origins of the campaign against him lie in charges by one student, Lilia Kilburn, that Comaroff sexually harassed her, and claims by two others, Margaret Czerwienski and Amulya Mandava, that he retaliated against them when they began circulating these claims.

After a lengthy, official university inquiry into these

allegations, Comaroff was exonerated of all charges except of having issued a warning, in fact entirely appropriate, to a gay student about the danger of her traveling openly with her partner in parts of Africa where homosexuals faced persecution. On equally illegitimate grounds, Harvard—in an effort to save face—later sanctioned Comaroff as well for allegedly making a statement (which he denies ever uttering) to Mandava she chose to interpret as “threatening,” though the university did not find that Comaroff intended his comments as a threat.

The three students, dissatisfied with the results of the investigation that essentially cleared the anthropologist, responded in February of this year with a lawsuit against Harvard claiming that the university “ignored” the charges they made, despite the lengthy and torturous investigation that involved interviewing dozens of individuals and reviewing thousands of pages of documents. Among other outrageous claims in the lawsuit is that Comaroff and his wife, by seeking to defend themselves publicly, were engaged in “textbook retaliation.”

University lawyers have effectively answered this suit, which the plaintiffs’ attorneys have had to amend in an effort to sustain and legitimize it.

The vicious smear campaign against Comaroff is being spearheaded by the *Crimson*, Harvard’s student newspaper, whose writers emulate and perhaps someday hope to become the scandalmongers of the *New York Times*.

Particularly disgraceful is the role of the HGSU-UAW union. One of Comaroff’s lawyers, Ruth O’Meara-Costello, offered an entirely appropriate response to a petition circulated by the union demanding that Comaroff be “de-listed” from his courses: “It is shocking that an employee union is

calling for a Harvard employee to be summarily punished and cast out of the university community based upon allegations that the university's process found him not responsible for or that have never been investigated."

The cabal that controls Local 5118, whose officials include two of Comaroff's accusers, is misusing a union structure to promote a witch-hunt that undermines democratic rights. It is setting a precedent that would allow anyone, including workers as well as professors, to be summarily fired or dismissed based on unsubstantiated charges.

The Biden administration has also now intervened on the side of the plaintiffs. An *amicus brief* filed Wednesday by the Justice Department asserts that Harvard may be liable if Comaroff retaliated against the accusers, as the latter claim.

The administration's intrusion into the Comaroff case helps clarify the political and class dynamics at work. The White House and the Democrats have a significant stake in the campaign. It is being used to refocus political attention on gender and identity politics, to be wielded against a growing movement of the working class.

The threatening character of this week's provocations against Comaroff must serve as a warning. This is the kind of operation generally organized by the extreme right. Given the campaign's disoriented petty bourgeois social base and its hints of anti-Semitism, there is more than a whiff of fascism here. Why not take the next step: build a pile of Comaroff's works and set it ablaze?

Harvard faculty members have distinguished themselves so far by their acquiescence to the witch-hunt. In February, 38 of his colleagues issued an open letter explaining that they knew "John Comaroff to be an excellent colleague, advisor and committed university citizen who has for five decades trained and advised hundreds of Ph.D. students of diverse backgrounds, who have subsequently become leaders in universities across the world. We are dismayed by Harvard's sanctions against him and concerned about its effects on our ability to advise our own students."

The filing of the accusers' wild lawsuit and a flurry of wrathful tweets and emails almost instantly knocked the stuffing out of the 38. Only an honorable handful of the professors refused to remove their names, apologize

and generally demean themselves.

The deceitful, underhanded modus operandi of the anti-Comaroff forces needs to be exposed as widely and thoroughly as possible. Faculty and students have the responsibility to examine the facts objectively. Such an examination will inevitably lead to strong, vocal opposition to the ongoing witch-hunt.

The situation can and must be turned around. It is high time to put a stop to the campaigns of denunciation and vilification using the method of baseless allegations and media-driven hysteria.

The Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality call on faculty, students and workers at Harvard University and beyond to oppose the attack on Comaroff and defend his right to continue his teaching at Harvard University.



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