Oppose the right-wing smear campaign aimed at silencing Canadian anti-COVID activist and former teacher Ryan Imgrund!

Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee urges teachers and all workers to reject the right-wing smear campaign on social media and in the corporate press against COVID activist and former teacher Ryan Imgrund.

Imgrund, who built up a large following among workers in Ontario thanks to his advocacy for COVID-19 public health measures, has been targeted by a rabid alliance of far-right anti-vaxxers, COVID deniers, and "left" proponents of identity politics.

They have seized upon and are promoting as fact unproven allegations made by the Ontario College of Teachers' Investigation Committee that Imgrund "abused" "one or more" of his students "psychologically" and/or "emotionally" and "sexually." Their goal is to silence Imgrund and declare his anti-Covid research illegitimate.

In making common cause with the far-right—which is making a perverse amalgam between Imgrund and sexual predation, and sexual predation and the fight for science-based public health measures—the middle-class #MeToo hysterics are materially assisting the capitalist ruling elite. Assisting it in enforcing its "live" (and die) "with the virus" pandemic policy and in intimidating working people who want to take up a fight to eliminate COVID-19.

The allegations against Imgrund were contained in a "notice of hearing" issued by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). The OCT oversees teacher certification in the province and is responsible for handling disciplinary matters. The document informs Imgrund that he will face a disciplinary hearing, at a date yet to be set, to determine whether he engaged in professional misconduct. It contains a long list of allegations, many trivial, others sweeping but vague, spanning a period from 2015 to 2021. Virtually all relate to his interactions with five female students.

While Imgrund has been accused of "sexual abuse," the allegations make no reference to any sexual acts or specific acts of sexual misconduct. No criminal charges have been filed against him.

A high school teacher for 18 years at the York Catholic District School Board, Imgrund has denied the allegations. He noted in an exchange with podcaster Dean Blundel that "there are three or four real points…And even these are perfectly understood with context. The other 15 + things are complete fabrications."

For much of the pandemic, Imgrund has been releasing daily statistics on the spread of COVID-19 via his Twitter account, including infection and death rates, and has gained a following of over 90,000 people. His well-researched information has been particularly valued by education workers, who were forced back into poorly ventilated schools by the combined efforts of the hard-right Ford government and the trade unions. Education workers turned to Imgrund because they were denied easily accessible information on the extent of COVID's spread in education institutions from official sources. The witch-hunters vilifying him have already succeeded in at least temporarily silencing Imgrund. He has not posted on his Twitter account since September 9.

Imgrund also became an advocate for high-quality personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers. Last October, he initiated a protest by teachers to demand N95 masks, which have proven to be effective in preventing COVID transmission. His campaign drew the ire of the teacher unions. The Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association warned its members that participating in the action by wearing an N95 mask at school, instead of the ineffective masks handed out by the school boards, would be illegal under their terms of employment and could result in their dismissal.

In the weeks prior to the public campaign against him, Imgrund called on his followers to join the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The OEWRFC was formed by education workers to wage a struggle, independent of the trade unions, for the global elimination of the coronavirus, for major improvements in wages and working conditions in the current bargaining round, and for the defence of public education.

The campaign to silence and censor Ryan Imgrund

Imgrund has made powerful enemies through his vocal opposition to the profits-before-lives, "let it rip" pandemic policy pursued by the entire political establishment, a fact that has been all too evident over recent days. Within hours of a local news website in Newmarket, the Toronto suburb where Imgrund taught, publishing a report on the Ontario College of Teachers' "hearing notice," well-known representatives of the far-right and the middle-class "left" were denouncing him on social media as a monster and serial child abuser. Those pillorying Imgrund promoted the allegations as fact, with a few throwing in his June resignation from the OCT as proof.

This witch-hunt has been stoked by the likes of far-right *Toronto Sun* columnist Brian Lilley; Denise Balkissoon, Toronto bureau chief for the left-leaning "green" publication *The Narwhal*; and Robert Benzie, the Queen's Park (Ontario legislative) bureau chief of the liberal *Toronto Star*.

Some of Imgrund's followers were swept up in and disoriented by this campaign and the anti-democratic #MeToo movement's assault on the presumption of innocence and the right to due process. Several publicly repudiated him and vowed to stop using and disseminating the information he has provided on the pandemic.

In a development with the most chilling implications for democratic rights and the fight for a science-based pandemic policy, the vilification of

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Imgrund has now spiralled into calls for his research to be censored. Radio stations, media outlets and other sites that interviewed or otherwise collaborated with him are coming under pressure to remove all traces of his work. He is to be made a non-person and his anti-COVID research effaced.

"Psychological abuse" and "sexual abuse" are serious charges, all the more so when made against an educator who has contact with minors, and must therefore be fully substantiated. But the allegations outlined in the OCT's "notice" are so vaguely worded that it is difficult to determine what precisely Imgrund is accused of doing, let alone whether there is substance to any of them. Based on what is now publicly known, even if the allegations were true, they would indicate at most very poor judgment and a lack of professionalism, not sexual predation.

The most widely cited allegation against Imgrund is that he sent a shirtless picture of himself to a female student and asked her whether she thought he was good-looking. He also allegedly called and texted four students late into the night during a 2017 school trip with the sports team he coached. When they failed to respond, he allegedly banged on the ceiling of his room, which was immediately below the students' room. Additionally, he is accused of having an "inappropriate personal relationship" with one of the students because he drove her to and from his house to babysit his kids, dressed up in her clothes at Halloween, yelled at her when she failed to respond to his personal messages, and drove her alone in his personal vehicle to a university in February 2021.

These incidents are accompanied by a long list of allegations that could have an entirely innocent explanation. While in his role as coach of the sports team, Imgrund is accused of "writing a document praising the athletic abilities of Student 1," practicing in one-on-one training sessions a technique that "required the students to push their buttocks up against him," and failing "to comply with a request from Student 1's parents with respect to Student 1's playing time and physical exertion." One is left in the dark as to whether the technique he practiced with the students was appropriate to the sport they were playing. Similarly, one cannot tell whether the document he wrote was part of a coach's standard responsibilities—a recommendation for a scholarship, perhaps—or an unusual departure from them.

Imgrund is also charged with allowing students on "one or more occasion … to call him by his first name" and telling students in one class they could swear, "because this is a cool zone."

At no point, with the possible exception of the buttocks charge, does the Ontario College of Teachers accuse Imgrund of inappropriate touching or other physical contact, never mind sexual acts. Indeed, it is impossible to determine from a review of the allegations which alleged incident is considered sexual abuse. Further complicating matters is the opaque definition of abuse in the OCT's official documents. Ontario Regulation 437/97, subsection 1, which Imgrund is accused of breaching, merely states under point 7.3 that "sexual abuse" of a student is an example of professional misconduct. The regulation refers the reader to section 30 of the Ontario College of Teachers Act. The act states under section 30.2 that "sexual abuse" of a student amounts to professional misconduct, but does not provide guidance on what amounts to abuse.

The "notice of hearing" explains that Imgrund or his legal representative is entitled to see the evidence against him at the proposed hearing, but the disciplinary committee is also empowered to hold the hearing without him if they cannot agree on a hearing date or he fails to appear.

Working people must demand an end to the witch-hunt of Imgrund and the efforts to scrub his valuable COVID advocacy from public view. Given the devastating impact the allegations have already had on his reputation, a proper hearing where all the evidence can be examined must take place, both to determine whether there is any substance to the accusations and to give Imgrund the opportunity to clear his name.

#MeToo and the attack on democratic rights

The smear campaign against Imgrund aims to prevent this from happening and has all the hallmarks of a #MeToo witch-hunt. Over recent years, unproven allegations of sexual improprieties and abuse have been used to destroy the careers of numerous public figures. One of the most well-known examples is journalist and whistleblower Julian Assange, who was accused of rape after he exposed the war crimes of US imperialism and its allies in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world. Pseudo-left parties and other representatives of the privileged middle class steeped in identity politics responded by denouncing Assange as a rapist. Even though the allegations were never proven and he was never charged with a crime, they abandoned him to be persecuted by the British and American states.

In addition to providing an instrument to destroy the reputations of public figures who get in the way of the powers that be, the #MeToo campaign has served to deaden popular consciousness of basic democratic rights and juridical principles. This includes, above all, undermining the key principles of innocent until proven guilty and due process, which guarantee the accused as well as the accuser a fair hearing and investigation.

The public vilification of Imgrund has come at a convenient time for the political establishment. Ontario's hated hard-right government has just overseen the beginning of the first school year with no public health measures in place since the start of the pandemic. Ontario's Chief Medical Officer Dr. Kieran Moore provoked widespread outrage when he announced that students will no longer be required to isolate at home when infected and that COVID would now be treated like the flu as part of his Orwellian-named "respiratory season" plan.

Even if all the allegations the Teachers' College have levelled against Imgrund were true, this would have no bearing on the validity of his anti-COVID advocacy. All those attempting to make a connection between his opposition to the policies of mass infection and death—an opposition shared by millions of workers across Canada—and his alleged personal misconduct have a right-wing political axe to grind. One, moreover, that is directed squarely against the working class.

While these people rail against Imgrund's purported monstrous actions and seek to turn him into a non-person over allegations that are as yet unproven and of a non-criminal character, the politicians responsible for imposing a deadly COVID-19 policy that has claimed the lives of over 44,000 people across Canada have gotten off scot-free and remain at their posts. Politicians, corporate executives and their union allies—who ordered workers back into unsafe workplaces and schools, publicly denied that COVID was transmitted through the air, dismantled COVID testing and reporting during the devastating Omicron wave, and implemented the demands of the far-right "Freedom Convoy" by eliminating all remaining public health measures—have far more to answer for than Ryan Imgrund.

The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee urges working people to give no quarter to the right-wing witch-hunt against Ryan Imgrund. The struggle to mobilize the working class to impose a global science-based Zero COVID policy is more important than ever, especially as millions of students return to school with no mitigations, and the threat of more virulent variants looms.

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