

The slanderous campaign of “Our Harvard Can Do Better” against Professor John Comaroff

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Another right-wing provocation was organized Wednesday by “Our Harvard Can Do Better,” a group of middle class vigilantes posturing as “anti-rape” activists.

Several dozen students staged a so-called occupation of an administration building, demanding that the administration declare a state of emergency “to address the sexual violence crisis on campus.” Moreover, the students promised to “keep coming back” until Professor John Comaroff resigns and “Harvard ends its complicity in harassment, misogyny, and discrimination.”

Our Harvard Can Do Better describes itself as “an undergraduate campaign working to end the institutional and cultural enablers of sexual violence at Harvard University, through survivor-centric and intersectional advocacy.”

The group doesn’t document any of its sweeping claims. What “sexual violence crisis”? What administration complicity in “harassment, misogyny, and discrimination”?

It counts on the reactions of those unstable elements at Harvard, the wealthiest university on the planet, who are indifferent to democratic rights and procedures. This is the meaning of the phrase “survivor-centric.” Accusers are to be believed, no matter what the facts of the case or the consequences. As the organization asserts, “Today, and every day, we believe survivors.”

Like all privileged petty-bourgeois elements, the group is instinctively anti-democratic. Hence the attempt to generate a lynch-mob atmosphere. There is no indication of widespread support for their vicious campaign on the Harvard campus.

The moral and intellectual level of Wednesday’s

“occupation” can be gleaned from signs held up prominently, directed toward Comaroff, an individual with a wide-ranging, global and distinguished academic career, “Resign asshole” and “Fuck off Comaroff.”

The occupiers chanted, “What do we want? Justice for survivors.” “When do want it? Now.” “If we don’t get it? Shut it down.”

In a press release, Our Harvard Can Do Better declared that its first demand, that Comaroff resign, “comes over a year after he was found guilty of violating the University’s sexual harassment and professional conduct policies.” Comaroff’s “violation” of Harvard’s policies involved two *comments* he made in an advisory capacity during office hours—one of which was wholly appropriate and the other he strongly denies ever uttering. The sanctions levied against him by Harvard were entirely illegitimate.

The group goes on to claim that Harvard’s finding “was revealed despite Comaroff’s efforts, as detailed in a recent complaint, to undermine the integrity of the fact-finding process, including by threatening accusers with professional retaliation.” This is a reference to the lawsuit filed by three graduate students—Lilia Kilburn, Margaret Czerwienski and Amulya Mandava—against the university for allegedly failing to protect them against unproven abuse and acts of retaliation.

As we have noted, the complaint “consists of a series of allegations and claims that could not conceivably sustain a conclusion of guilt. In a court of law, there are rules on hearsay. The complaint contains unsubstantiated assertions, more rumors and gossip and accounts of situations that no one can evaluate and appeals to a whole set of prejudices and preconceptions. The lengthy, overheated narrative is

larded with various unproven and unprovable claims against Comaroff.”

Along these very lines, Our Harvard Can Do Better alleges that Comaroff “continues to face several open allegations dating as far back as the 1970s, where he was reportedly seen regularly around undergraduate dormitories at the University of Chicago [!]. Despite this record [!], Harvard administration welcomed him back to the classroom this past fall, where he was met with student protests,” i.e., by the same reactionary elements organizing Wednesday’s phony “occupation.” This is the type of filthy gossip and innuendo on which the protesters base themselves.

Comaroff is guilty of nothing. There is no substance whatsoever to the claims against him, as exhaustive inquiries have demonstrated. The wild slanders of Our Harvard Can Do Better, aided and abetted by the *Harvard Crimson* and the unprincipled leadership of the Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU)—UAW Local 5118, are just that: slanders.

Local 5118 is run by opportunists and careerists who have no genuine association with the struggles of the working class. The local’s executive board, in fact, has included two of Comaroff’s accusers. Former HGSU President Brandon Mancilla was recently elected director of UAW Region 9A. Mancilla was instrumental in pushing through a four-year contract with the university in November 2021 that imposed an effective pay cut on Harvard graduate students.

The lies about Comaroff reached the floor of the UAW Special Bargaining Convention this week, when Rachel Petherbridge, a member of Local 5118’s executive board, claimed that the anthropology professor had harassed the three graduate students “for years,” adding, in shocked tones, that “he is still teaching undergraduates right now.”

As WSWS writer Eric London noted in a tweet, “[Margaret] Czerwienski, Petherbridge & local UAW officials are engaged in a witch hunt campaign to fire a professor based on lies. Hounding professors out of their jobs has nothing to do with democracy, it only subverts workers’ rights.”



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