

One year of the #MeToo movement

By David Walsh
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The #MeToo movement is one year old this month. Articles in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* magazine detailing allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein launched the campaign. Dozens and dozens of accusations have followed.

The ostensible aim of this ongoing movement is to combat sexual harassment and assault, i.e., to bring about some measure of social progress. However, the repressive, regressive means resorted to—including unsubstantiated and often anonymous denunciations and sustained attacks on the presumption of innocence and due process—give the lie to the campaign’s “progressive” claims. Such methods are the hallmark of an anti-democratic, authoritarian movement, and one, moreover, that deliberately seeks to divert attention from social inequality, attacks on the working class, the threat of war and the other great social and political issues of the day.

Instead of bringing about an improvement in conditions, in fact, the #MeToo movement has helped undermine democratic rights, created an atmosphere of intimidation and fear and destroyed the reputations and careers of a significant number of artists and others. It has taken its appropriate place in the Democratic Party strategy of opposing the Trump administration and the Republicans on a right-wing footing.

The sexual hysteria has centered in Hollywood and the media, areas not coincidentally where subjectivism, intense self-absorption and the craving to be in the limelight abound.

The McCarthyite witch-hunt encountered so little opposition in the late 1940s and early 1950s in Hollywood in large measure because of the lack of political preparedness of the American artistic-intellectual left, under the influence of Stalinism and the Popular Front. However, combined with that, there was also the fact that to save their careers—and their swimming pools, in Orson Welles’s famous quip—individuals opportunistically turned against former friends and colleagues, “named names,” broke off relations, often apparently without a qualm. One should recall the immortal phrase of actor James Dean, “explaining” why he had consented to work with director-informer Elia Kazan, about whom he had previously spoken only with contempt: “He made me a star.”

There should be no illusions about the morals that have long prevailed in the film and related industries. A great many attractive young women and men, desperate for fame, find themselves at the mercy of influential or even relatively lowly “gatekeeper” figures, male and sometimes female, who seem to control their future destinies. This is a situation overripe for abuse. It is not primarily about sex, but about the assertion of power.

It would take a contemporary Theodore Dreiser or F. Scott Fitzgerald to depict the sort of fantasy about the golden world of celebrity—and the dread of not being allowed to share in it—that animates a great number of young people in America, especially under conditions where the alternative for many seems to be an economic or psychic abyss.

(Clyde Griffiths in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*: “He felt so out of it, so lonely and restless and tortured by all that he saw here, for everywhere that he looked he seemed to see love, romance, contentment. What to do? Where to go? He could not go on alone like this forever. He was too miserable... It was so hard to be poor, not to have money and position and

to be able to do in life exactly as you wished... So much for the effect of wealth, beauty, the peculiar social state to which he most aspired, on a temperament that was as fluid and unstable as water... How marvelous to be of that world.”)

No one should be naïve about the extent to which many of the aspirants consent to sexual activity in the name of succeeding in a career, justifying it as one of the unpleasant overhead costs associated with “making it,” or even self-deceptively bathing certain situations, which involve nothing at their core but cold, calculated moves, in a quasi-romantic aura.

Embarrassment and remorse may set in later, especially if things do not go quite right. Individuals, including actresses whose careers—through no fault of their own in many cases—are stagnating or fading, may blindly and vindictively concentrate their disappointment or disillusionment with Hollywood retroactively on a figure such as Weinstein. (Moreover, as we have noted before, in some cases the sexual misconduct campaign has actually revived careers and opened up new financial possibilities. It is empty-headed to go on lauding the “bravery” of accusers who come forward, when they generally meet with media acclaim and have even done quite well out of the whole business.)

One has no special reason to think well of today’s crop of film personalities, who have pursued success under bad artistic and ideological conditions, where social indifference and self-centeredness have been transformed into positive virtues. As we wrote last year, “To be brutally frank, there is a great difference between the situation facing a working class woman, on the one hand, for whom acquiescing to sexual pressures in a factory or office may be virtually a life-and-death issue, and the choices open to an entertainer or performer, on the other, who plays along in the interests of advancing a career.”

In their rage and disorientation, a variety of #MeToo promoters have come up with the idea that “women must be believed” when they make accusations of sexual misconduct, even in the absence of any other proof. It is a painful reality that there are certain situations that may, especially well after the fact, hinge only on the opposed say-so of two individuals. That undoubtedly leaves open the possibility that certain perpetrators may escape punishment.

But the alternative—simply relying on the accuser’s word—is worse and makes a mockery of the presumption of innocence or even the requirement that the preponderance of evidence must point to guilt. Then we are truly in the realm of the witch hunt and the lynch mob.

Like men, women lie—as such notorious episodes as the Scottsboro Boys and Emmett Till cases, along with the more recent ones involving Tawana Brawley, false accusations against the Duke lacrosse team, “Jackie” at the University of Virginia and the charges against CBC personality Jian Ghomeshi—demonstrate.

Precisely because women face particular and hypocritical penalties for “unorthodox” or disapproved-of types of sexual behavior, they have an incentive to lie under certain circumstances.

Along the same lines, moreover, one would simply be ignoring social and psychological reality to ignore the truth of novelist Alfred Döblin’s comment that precisely because women make up a “down-trodden sex that keeps battling to assert itself,” like “terrorists,” they do “not shrink from

the most inhumane acts of violence.” Vengefulness can be an inverted expression of psychologically or socially oppressed and hurtful conditions, but that does not ennoble it or legitimize making a virtual program out of it. “I don’t care about innocent men facing punishment because women have suffered so much!”—the subtext of much of the feminist commentary—is a dreadful and shameful slogan without the slightest progressive content to it.

The *Economist* recently reported the results of polls conducted in November 2017 and September 2018, indicating that the “year-long storm of allegations, confessions and firings has actually made Americans more sceptical about sexual harassment.” The magazine wrote: “The share of American adults responding that men who sexually harassed women at work 20 years ago should keep their jobs has risen from 28 percent to 36 percent. The proportion who think that women who complain about sexual harassment cause more problems than they solve has grown from 29 percent to 31 percent. And 18 percent of Americans now think that false accusations of sexual assault are a bigger problem than attacks that go unreported or unpunished.” The article added, “Surprisingly, these changes in opinion against victims have been slightly stronger among women than men.”

This growing skepticism on the part of the general public, who increasingly tend to view celebrities like Rose McGowan, Asia Argento and others as neurotic self-promoters or worse, has a generally healthy component. It is also one of the factors behind the ramping up of the rhetoric and the frenzy in #MeToo, Democratic Party and pseudo-left circles during the Brett Kavanaugh-Christine Blasey Ford confrontation. These forces have largely failed to persuade the American public, and now more and more tend to berate it.

However, their efforts have consequences. In so far as the dishonest, sensationalized journalistic “exposés” of Ronan Farrow at the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times* reporting staff and numerous others unravel, as they well may, this will undermine the claims and accusations of genuine victims of sexual abuse and create the danger of a backlash. The recklessness of Farrow, Jessica Valenti, Rebecca Traister and company in this regard is merely another expression of their profound, petty-bourgeois indifference to the fate of the mass of the population, including its female half.

Sexual assault and violence, most of it against women, are significant and horrific social phenomena, no matter whose statistics one chooses to rely on. The invasion of one’s body is one of the most damaging and humiliating possible experiences. Sexual abuse expresses the brutality of class society in one of the forms in which it appears in the everyday life of individuals and communities.

Poor and immigrant women, the socially defenseless and dispossessed generally, the very young, those at the mercy of the rich and powerful, those dependent on their employers or on government officials, are the most vulnerable. However, violence within and among the oppressed is also a fact of life in bourgeois society. Those who have been maltreated may themselves maltreat others. Studies have revealed, for example, a sharp increase in domestic violence in families where layoffs have occurred.

In any event, despite occasional lip service, no one in the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements, now led by wealthy, influential individuals like Tina Tchen, Barack Obama’s former assistant, speaks up for working class women, who are left to their fate.

All in all, #MeToo is a reactionary response to a real social problem.

The emptiness of middle class feminist complaints about the unfairness and injustice of present-day society is shown by their selectiveness. They could not care less about the thousands of men who die in industrial accidents or the tens of thousands of men and boys who overdose from opioids or commit suicide on an annual basis. That suffering is entirely taken for granted, along with the murderous havoc wreaked by American

military interventions all over the planet, often carried out these days in the name of “human rights” or even “women’s rights.”

Those who complain the loudest tend to have the least to complain about. Professional women have made great strides in the past several decades. According to UK researcher and academic Alison Wolf, “Among younger men and women [in the advanced capitalist countries] with equal education levels, who have also put in equal time in the same occupation, there are no gender pay gaps left,” although women continue to be financially punished if they have children (unless they are tremendously wealthy).

The numbers of female lawyers, physicians, dentists, accountants and other professionals have leaped in recent years. Wolf explains that in the US, “women have gone from 3 percent of practising lawyers in 1970 to 40 percent today, and over half of all law students.” The Russell Sage Foundation notes that “the number of professional degrees completed by men has declined slightly (from 40,229 in 1982 to 34,661 in 2010), while women’s professional degree completion has increased almost twentyfold—from 1,534 professional degrees in 1970 to 30,289 in 2010.”

A portion of this newly affluent and independent social layer is hungry for more, and sees incumbent, still better-situated males as rivals to be displaced—if necessary, by ruthless and underhanded means. This ferocious in-fighting, “gender cleansing,” within the upper-middle class breaks into the headlines in the form of the #MeToo movement and the numerous attempts to oust academic and media figures over charges of sexual misconduct, many of which prove to be either overblown or invented.

German socialist Clara Zetkin pointed out as long ago as 1896 that bourgeois women’s “demand for sex equality in carrying on an occupation... means nothing else than the realisation of free trade and free competition between men and women. The realisation of this demand awakens a conflict of interest between the women and men of the middle class and the intelligentsia.” On the other hand, “the liberation struggle of the proletarian woman cannot be—as it is for the bourgeois woman—a struggle against the men of her own class.” She fights “hand in hand with the men of her own class.”

To justify and facilitate their advancement at the expense of supposedly bestial or predatory men, the #MeToo feminists have attempted to impose their own moral code. This has little to do with safeguarding women in general and workplace safety in particular. It has had no positive impact whatsoever on America’s workplaces, where tyrannical conditions for both genders—increasingly reminiscent of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—prevail.

One of the most pernicious aspects of the sexual witch hunt has been the effort to stigmatize a wide range of sexual activities, “including,” as we have pointed out, “many that reflect the ambiguities and complexities of human interactions.”

In some unhappy and sordid revival of American Puritanism or Victorianism, prominent men have been denounced for promiscuity (for example, “serial dating”), adultery and, in one nationally publicized case, “flirting that veered suddenly into sexual territory, unwanted sexual advances and consensual sexual relations that ended abruptly” (i.e., breaking off a relationship without sufficient warning!).

Alongside this is the anti-democratic and spurious effort to criminalize “gray-zone sex” experiences—those, for instance, where individuals agree to have sex, but one thinks better of it after the fact. Thus, we get the disgusting attack on comedian Aziz Ansari by a woman who had an unhappy encounter with him and proceeded to complain to a journalist about it—“3,000 words of revenge porn,” in the words of *Atlantic* columnist Caitlin Flanagan. “The clinical detail in which the story is told is intended not to validate her account as much as it is to hurt and humiliate Ansari,” Flanagan went on. “Together, the two women [including the journalist] may have destroyed Ansari’s career, which is

now the punishment for every kind of male sexual misconduct, from the grotesque to the disappointing.”

In the spirit of that attempted destruction, a deplorable article at Jezebel by Julianne Escobedo Shepherd informs us that “#MeToo’s next direction is toward a deeper look at some of the most common and harder-to-define experiences. It’s looking toward a more equitable world in which women and other marginalized genders can live less fearfully, by digging deeper into the gray areas and educating all of us about the harm they perpetuate... How do we talk about behavior that is harmful and inequitable but isn’t illegal? How do we talk about the women affected by it? And what happens when accusations of such behavior are made against someone who is supposed to be an ally?”

This is the “lawless frontier,” as the WSWs has argued, where “punishment will be meted out through public humiliation and ridicule,” and where the “subjective, personal and arbitrary are being advanced as an alternative basis for establishing criminal liability.”

The “gray area” must also include various forms of sexual fumbling and miscommunication, including the making of “unwelcome” or “unwanted” advances, which, if banned, would effectively put an end to new sexual relationships of any type ever coming into being.

Categorizing every misstep or badly chosen word as a form of abuse is inhuman and reactionary nonsense, which, if taken at all seriously, will do tremendous harm to the psyches of countless young women and men in particular.

Meanwhile, the daily struggle to earn a living, clothe and house a family and navigate an unstable social and political environment preoccupies the vast majority of working class people, female and male. On top of that, a larger and larger number are coming to realize that a radical change in the entire social order is necessary.

But the #MeToo witch-hunters are not part of and are fiercely hostile to that struggle.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>