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From Britain: Sexual harassment on the left - "It's essential that there are procedures and structures in place which command the confidence of women members"

Thursday 23 November 2017, by [STOWE Andy](#) (Date first published: 22 November 2017).

Sexual harassment of women is pervasive in society writes Andy Stowe. What should the Left do?

The allegations against Harvey Weinstein and a list of men which grows daily are indicative of a much wider problem and there remains widespread acceptance of the idea that men are entitled to touch, comment on or proposition women. In my local gym's men's changing room the consensus among one group was "making a pass a few years ago ain't a hanging offence".

The left should hold itself to a higher standard, and by left here we should stretch the definition from the Progress faction of the Labour Party to the Marxist groups outside it, trade unions and campaigning organisations.

However, Bex Bailey has claimed that she was raped by a senior Labour official and told not to report it by another party member because it could damage her career [1]. At least Labour have suggested that rape victims should go to the police. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) opted to conduct its own investigation into a rape allegation despite not having the forensic resources or professionals capable of doing so. Its national secretary wrote a lengthy article [2] explaining that "rape had not occurred and that other allegations of sexual misconduct were not proven, and recommended that no disciplinary action be taken against the member involved." He neglected to mention that the people who conducted the investigation were all long time associates of the alleged perpetrator as were those who exonerated him.

How should left organisations deal with the inevitable cases of sexual harassment and abuse that are sure to happen again in the future?

Labour and the SWP offer clear examples of what shouldn't happen. Complaints from women should not be downplayed or covered up. It's striking that both the Labour official who advised Bex to stay silent and the SWP leadership were more interested in protecting their organisations than standing up for the victim. That's the same reflex that kicked in for the Catholic Church in its centuries' long practice of protecting abusers.

Labour has commissioned a barrister to conduct an independent investigation into how Bailey's complaint was handled. We do not know if it's being investigated by the police, though we must assume that it is. The party is also contracting an independent specialist organisation to offer confidential advice and support to any individual affected by sexual harassment, having learned that

its own staffers are manifestly unable to do so. Having clear processes which are removed from an organisation's own power structures are is an essential safeguard for victims.

Should the police get involved?

When a criminal act has been committed it's wrong for a left organisation to advise women not to go to the police. The only real sanction these groups can offer is expulsion and ostracism from their circles and that hardly matches the severity of the offence. The SWP's attempt at an investigation, apart from being compromised and amateurish, carried no credibility in the labour movement and a large section of its own membership. Moreover, an investigation like that would not be able establish links with crimes a perpetrator may have committed against other women who did go to the police. Socialist and anti-racist criticisms of the police don't alter the fact that they are the only institution able to do that sort of thing to a standard that might secure a conviction.

Much of the misogynistic behaviour on the left will not meet the threshold for prosecution. Speak to women in the Labour Party and it's often not long before they tell you about unwelcome touches, comments about their appearance, sexist jokes, intimidation and being silenced or ignored. This list is by no means exhaustive and it happens on social media and in real life.

For these sorts of behaviours it's essential that there are procedures and structures in place which command the confidence of women members. A woman's forum in which women are able to share their experiences is indispensable and is a feature of many local Labour Party branches. These bodies must have the right to report back to the local leadership and GC raising the issues, making recommendations and shaping the party's atmosphere. When investigations are required into misogynistic or sexist behaviour elected panels with a majority of women should carry them out. Women are better able to judge what is unacceptable language and conduct directed against them, and in organisations with hierarchies and networks of status conscious men maybe hoping for patronage a women led enquiry is more likely to get to the truth.

Things may be changing. Women who have been the victims of this sort of behaviour have often been unwilling to complain about it because they didn't expect their complaints would be taken seriously. The spread of the #MeToo message, mainly by women, has given confidence to others to speak out about harassment which many have kept to themselves for years. Knowing they are not alone has given many women the confidence to speak out. The responsibility for the left is to listen to what they say.

Andy Stowe

P.S.

* November 22, 2017 :

<http://socialistresistance.org/sexual-harassment-on-the-left/11181>

Footnotes

[1] <https://news.sky.com/story/labour-investigate-activist-bex-baileys-rape-allegation-11107287>

[2] <http://isj.org.uk/the-politics-of-the-swp-crisis/>