

# 'Slutwalk' protests: Women reject sexism

Over recent weeks a number of issues have come up which highlight the degree of sexism women face, here and internationally, and the opposition to it.

Justice minister, Ken Clarke, had to apologise after his comments on sentencing laws on BBC Radio 5 implied that some forms of rape are 'less serious'.

Dominique Strauss-Kahn resigned as IMF chief after an allegation of sexual assault in the US led to a whole series of claims against him. A Kent Tory election candidate resigned after referring to local women as "sluts" in a discussion on Facebook.

But women and men have responded to this. SARAH WRACK, Socialist Party Women, writes here about the 'Slutwalk' protests that have taken place across Canada and the US and are planned for the UK.

On 24 January, a Toronto police officer told a campus safety information session at Osgoode Hall Law School that one way women can limit the chance of being raped is to "avoid dressing like sluts".

Immediately staff and students demanded a written apology. A 'Slutwalk' demonstration of a thousand people was then organised in Toronto against rape and against the false idea that victims bring it upon themselves.

Since then, a dozen other demonstrations have taken place across Canada and the US, and around a hundred have been organised across the world. One is planned for 11 June in London and feminist groups in Brighton are also talking about the idea.

Comments like those of the Toronto police officer are not unique. A 2005 Amnesty International survey found that 26% of people in the UK think a woman was partially or totally responsible for being raped if she was wearing sexy or revealing clothing. One result of this has been that victims tend to feel ashamed and in the UK 2006 research suggests that between 75-95% of rapes are never reported to the police.

Almost one in five women will

experience sexual assault at some point in their lives. There is no typical rape victim – people of all ages, sizes and races are raped. About 75% of rape is planned in advance.

Research has shown that much of rape is about power and control, not about sex. Whether someone is dressed 'provocatively' has nothing to do with why they may be attacked.

It is very good that thousands of people, mainly young women, have come out onto the streets to express their anger at the upside-down way that rape is seen by some people. It has been decades since there was a sizeable women's movement and this could be signs of its revival.

But an outpouring of anger alone won't be enough to change things. This anger must be channelled. It is positive that the Slutwalk Toronto website stresses that the march is open to anyone of any gender, any age and wearing any type of clothes. To be successful in challenging attitudes the movement will have to draw in the mass of the working class.

The Toronto website says: "Historically, the term 'slut' has carried a predominantly negative connotation... And whether dished out as a



**Thousands have demonstrated already**

serious indictment of one's character or merely as a flippant insult, the intent behind the word is always to wound, so we're taking it back. 'Slut' is being re-appropriated."

However, using the word 'slut' in an attempt to 'reclaim' it is unlikely to appeal to the majority of women. The positive side of this is that it shows how far women have come in the last 50 years. Many young women now feel comfortable with their sexuality and are proud to say so.

It's important to show that this increased confidence has nothing to do with rape.

But 'slut' has always been a sexist, derogatory word for women and most will not feel comfortable with the idea that accepting it and saying we're 'proud' of it will somehow change the attitude behind it.

There has also been some debate between supporters of Slutwalk online about feminism, with some be-

ing explicitly against talking about the conditions facing women more generally.

But a campaign against rape in isolation from all other aspects of women's oppression will only ever have a limited impact. It is vital to address the increasing material problems facing women in all areas of their lives.

Large numbers of refuges for victims of domestic violence are under threat of closure because of government cuts. Some councils have even considered turning off street lights to save money. And job cuts and cuts in benefits, such as those for single parents, could mean that more women feel pushed towards work in strip clubs or even prostitution. All of these will increase the risk of sexual assault and rape and must be resisted.

Rape, like domestic violence and sexual harassment, is a symptom of

a deeply unequal class-based society that leads some men to think that they can control women, including sexually.

This is reinforced by women's material inequality and lower status in society. We must challenge sexism and demand education about the myths and facts of rape and decent support for rape victims.

However, around 750,000 public sector workers are preparing for strike action on 30 June against attacks on their pensions. The majority of these are women. Through a mass movement of working class people, including general strike action, there is the opportunity to inflict defeats on the weak and divided Con-Dem coalition.

This process of struggle will see millions of people questioning the brutal, sexist and exploitative capitalist society in which we live and looking for a socialist alternative.

## Atos Origin - profiting from pain

**Les Woodward**  
Remploy Trade Union National Convenor

Disabled people are extremely angry with Steve Cram for accepting the post of 'ambassador' for big business privatisers Atos Origin in their capacity as IT partner for the London 2012 Olympics.

Steve Cram is a legend in the athletics world, being the first man to run 1,500 metres in less than three minutes 30 seconds. Atos Origin is also famous, or more correctly infamous, in disability circles as the

company contracted by the DWP to deliver assessments for disability-related benefits such as Disability Living Allowance.

Atos secured the multi-million pound DWP contracts with huge financial incentives to reduce the numbers of disabled people claiming benefits. There have been demonstrations around the country outside Atos offices against the arbitrary way the company deals with benefits claims from severely disabled people.

There are very many criticisms. The process is impersonal, people felt their dignity was being taken

away from them, no medical evidence is taken into account. But the biggest criticism is that the process does not recognise mental health issues at all.

Steve Cram reported in the Guardian (8/5/2007) that: "Paralympic athletes deserve as much respect as the able-bodied." Many disabled people wish he would show the same sentiments for disabled people, some of whom are the most vulnerable members of society and also some of the poorest.

Steve Cram MBE, also known as "The Jarrow Arrow" has had a career born from his success on track, becoming Chancellor of the University of Sunderland in 2008 and has a reputation as a motivational speaker at social events. He is also an athletics pundit and writes for the Guardian.



hardship and yes, even death.

There have been suicides from people who feel they are no longer valued by society, and that life imprisonment in their own home is too much to bear or feel that the choices of whether to eat or heat the house just aren't worth the hassle of making.

There is a campaign by disabled people's organisations to get Steve Cram to change his mind. But no

one knows how lucrative this deal with the devil is to him so I would advise people not to hold their breath.

**Les Woodward and a group of other Remploy workers are coming to the National Shop Stewards Network anti-cuts conference on 11 June (for details of this vital event see page one).**

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