

Women in Combat: Behind the Pentagon's Decision

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On Jan. 24, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced that the Pentagon had lifted its ban on women serving in combat, and that more than 230,000 “battlefront” positions could be opened up to them. Military officials must submit plans by May on how to include women in combat, although they have until January 2016 to list male-only positions.

The reality is that women have already served in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. They comprise 15 percent of the 1.4 million active military personnel. More than 280,000 women have been sent to Iraq, Afghanistan or to other war zones; 152 have died and 800 been injured. Enlisted women want payment for their combat duties, and they seek promotions to jobs denied them; some are suing the Pentagon over this issue.

Women join the military for the same reasons as do men. Because of the recession, high unemployment, and the proliferation of part-time and low-wage jobs, they are also subjected to the “economic draft.” This is especially true for women of color, who face worse discrimination and economic inequality. The military recruits them by promising college educations, job training and benefits.

What is the real reason behind the Pentagon's decision now?

Is the U.S. military suddenly purging itself of sexism? Just look at the high rate of sexual assaults within the ranks and the officials' inaction in holding perpetrators accountable. Military women are frequently mistreated — at Veterans Administration facilities and while seeking sexual trauma treatment and disability benefits.

The real answer to this question was hinted at by Joint Chiefs of Staff head, Gen. Martin Dempsey, who stressed that, “ultimately, we are acting to strengthen the armed forces.” (ABC News, Jan. 24)

The Pentagon needs more combat troops to carry out its ever-expanding war drive, to fulfill its imperialist goals of dominating many corners of the globe. It plans to send more troops to Africa, Australia and East Asia, even as it maintains existing deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Male soldiers have been serving three and four deployments in war zones. Many suffer from war-related post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Troop morale is low; suicides are at an all-time high. There is no military draft to replenish the forces. Pentagon and other government officials fear a major revolt among the youth if they try to reinstate it.

Women are needed in combat. This is a major reason for the Pentagon's new policy.

What does it mean for women and men to be soldiers in an imperialist army, one that brings death and destruction in its wake? This military machine does not bring health care, food or other aid to the people under occupation, subject to bombings or threatened by drone attacks. It's a death machine.

In the Israeli Defense Forces, women do 90 percent of the jobs men do and the government claims that shows it has "liberated" women. But their role, just like the men soldiers of this patriarchal settler state, is to brutally occupy Palestinian territories and oppress the people. There is nothing progressive about it.

However, many times in history armed women have played a progressive role, such as in World War II Resistance movements or in the Vietnamese liberation army. This is not just a question of women's participation. The issue is the class character of the military, in whose interests it is fighting and for what purpose.

Women in the U.S. should not face sexist or racist discrimination anywhere. There should be no barriers for any women to higher education, jobs, livable wages and essential government programs, including reproductive and other health care.

Moreover, the federal government should enact a strong Equal Rights Amendment that guarantees women's rights and bans all discrimination.

Let's renew the call for women's full equality while demanding that all U.S. troops be brought home now.

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