

Resisting Weapons Industry Influence in Our Schools and Elsewhere

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Reducing the power and influence of harmful industries is essential for the preservation of life. The industry that needs war and instability for its survival – the global weapons industry – exerts extraordinary and growing influence over society, reaching into and reshaping public life and attitudes. The Australian education system, our national war memorial, and our financial institutions are just some of the sites where the power and influence of this harmful industry can be seen – and be resisted.

There's a lot at stake for the global weapons industry. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute states that in 2021 the combined arms sales of the world's largest arms-producing and military services companies were \$592 billion (Beraud-Sudreau et al. 2022).

In many countries, spending on weapons programs appears to suffer few constraints, unlike spending in areas of desperate social and environmental need. In Australia for example, eye-watering amounts are dedicated even for extremely controversial programs, such as the proposed nuclear-powered submarines which are predicted by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) to cost up to one hundred and seventy billion dollars (Nicholls et al. 2021: 71). Once the word 'security' is uttered, governments simply foot the bill for unconscionably expensive weapons programs. In addition, in early 2018 the Australian government announced funding of 3.8 billion dollars to set up a Defence Export Facility to actively assist the industry.

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) has observed that 'Many corporate actors invest extensive resources in influencing public policy-makers to make decisions which advance their immediate commercial and financial interests at the expense of the health and wellbeing of many people in society' (PHAA 2021). Military goods are among the examples given by the PHAA of products that damage public health.

However it is not just political influence that the weapons industry seeks. It also targets young people through our education system – at primary, secondary and tertiary levels – with the explicit goal of attracting the 'best and brightest' students in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths).

Government and industry alike promote jobs in weapons programs, hiding the industry's core business behind words such as 'exciting careers', 'cutting-edge technology' and 'jobs of the future'. At the tertiary level there are many programs on offer, such as the government's Defence Science Partnerships program which every public university in Australia has signed on to. A policy brief by ASPI and the International Cyber Policy Centre, *'Building genuine trust: A framework and strategy for Indigenous STEM and cyber pathways'* (2022: 50) states that Defence funding comes into play in approximately 50% of STEM initiatives at the national level.

However the industry has its eyes on younger students as well. For schools there is a long list of programs, grants, scholarships, events, tours of company premises, exhibitions at careers fairs and direct personal engagement between industry personnel and students and teachers. These are provided by the Australian subsidiaries of the global weapons giants. With a grossly underfunded public education system, the provision of such programs is attractive to schools and teachers. The National Youth Science Forum (NYSF), which promotes and assists the country's most promising young scientific minds, has as its principal funder Lockheed Martin, the world's biggest weapons maker.

The Medical Association for Prevention of War (MAPW) has produced a report, *Minors and Missiles*, about the influence of weapons companies in our schools (MAPW 2022). The report documents how the big global players in the industry seek to build positive brand recognition amongst Australian primary and secondary students, so that young people are not only skilled in STEM but also socialised to regard wars as inevitable, and the industry as a force for good.

As just one example of what's on offer, BAE Systems, the world's sixth largest weapons company with 97% of its sales in 2021 being weaponry (Beraud-Sudreay et al. 2022), appropriates characters such as Jack and the Beanstalk, the Gingerbread Man and Hansel and Gretel, in BAE-branded activities for young children. BAE Systems, supplier of much of the weaponry for the bombing of Yemen, also promoted their brand name via financial support for the children's charity The Smith Family which provides educational opportunities for disadvantaged children and youth. It was only the bad publicity around the arrangement that led the charity to terminate it in 2020 (Daley 2020).

In addition to education and charities, the industry focusses on war commemoration, where the nation remembers those who have died in our wars – the very wars that the industry needs. Corporate partners of the Australian War Memorial can receive benefits including corporate branding, program and activity naming rights, advertising recognition, venue hire waivers for functions, and invitations and attendance allocations to major ceremonies. The latter would of course create opportunities to engage with decision-makers in defence purchases. For BAE Systems, the benefits included the naming of the Memorial's theatre as BAE Theatre. In 2020, after campaigning by activists, the Memorial's contract with BAE Systems was not renewed. The current focus of MAPW's campaign Reclaim Remembrance is the Memorial's financial arrangement with Lockheed Martin.

A key requirement for outreach by any industry whose products cause grave harm, regardless of any legitimate uses for those products in some circumstances, is its social licence to engage in promotions such as those outlined above. Citizens have power over this by withholding the social licence. The protection of vulnerable young people from the corporate influence of harmful industries is particularly important in our education system. Teachers and schools can withhold the opportunity for harmful industries to engage with students. Education departments can explicitly name the industries – including the weapons industry – that are inappropriate partners for schools. Education departments throughout Australia vary in the extent to which they do this. Stronger action to protect young people from the influence of harmful industries is needed.

Undermining of companies whose products cause harm can be brought about also by another means – divestment. The stigmatising of investments in weapons companies, and especially those that manufacture nuclear weapons, is already playing an important role in the struggle to abolish these worst-of-all weapons of mass destruction. In January 2021, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons came into force, becoming part of international law. The stigma of illegality now applies to these weapons, along with that of immorality that has applied since they were first used in 1945. The campaign Quit Nukes, a collaboration between MAPW and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) Australia, works to get superannuation funds out of financing nuclear weapons. In 2021, Quit Nukes and The Australia Institute reported that most major Australian super funds have holdings in nuclear weapons companies (Quit Nukes 2021). Some highlight their exclusion of 'controversial weapons', but do not include nuclear weapons in the definition. In that year, after advocacy by Quit Nukes, the Responsible Investment Association of Australia declared that if superannuation funds want to claim that they invest responsibly then they must divest from nuclear weapons.

Much can be done to remove the insidious influence and privileged access with which weapons companies expand their core business of profiting from human suffering. Much remains to be done.

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from "October Sequence"

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Her psyche winters in Antarctica in case
The melting speeds up she hides her face on Zoom
Makes rash declarations to make sure
People know she is in charge
By way of pale authority and dowdy look
With bark supposing bite no one is interested
In fearing hearing what she hides
The gaps in background gaps in teeth
Gaps in experience she presents as
Long in the tooth apart from accompanying
Wisdom music humor smile
She hovers above people she deems her minions
She can only quash never embrace
And seeks out ways to break
The flow the joy humanity
As others look around them locate
New pursuits ways to recover
Innocence and joy

SHEILA A MURPHY

from "October Sequence"

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In perpetuity your grace shines lace
Sweet shamrock green veined luminosity
Pale threads distend the reach
As voices hover near
And months traipse close to walkways
With shelving half complete with relics
Remnants spliced a tacit bloom white
Shimmering response to sunlight
While the moon completes our dream
And shadows shift the pool
Where species swim mind rinses
Quiet with more peace than
Silver any day now memory
Will cleanse the quotient tithed
As guilt free gilded maturation
Slides into the joy beams hammocking
The margins of familiar boundaries

SHEILA A MURPHY