

Racist gunman kills himself after three-day rampage in Illinois and Indiana

Martin McLaughlin
6 July 1999

A white supremacist college student who had murdered two men and wounded at least eight others shot and killed himself after a confrontation with police in southern Illinois late Sunday night. Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, 21, was linked to a series of shootings over the Fourth of July weekend which began in Chicago and continued through the downstate Illinois cities of Springfield, Decatur and Urbana and on to Bloomington, Indiana, where the gunman lived.

Smith's blue Ford Taurus was seen by eyewitnesses at the site of all the shootings except Decatur, and shell casings from his two pistols, a .22 and a .380 semi-automatic, were also found. The Taurus was found abandoned near the town of Salem, in southern Illinois, where Smith carjacked a van and attempted to escape a police pursuit.

The three-day record indicates that Smith was targeting Jews, blacks and Asians. The attacks began with a 15-minute shooting spree in the Rogers Park neighborhood of northwest Chicago, which is predominately populated by Orthodox Jews, as well as large numbers of immigrants from all over the world. Smith circled a two-block area, first getting out of his car and shooting one man, then firing wildly through his car window at other passers-by, mainly Orthodox men returning home from Sabbath services, highly identifiable in their black wide-brimmed hats and black suits.

Smith then drove into the near-northside suburb of Skokie, which is also predominately Jewish and was the scene of provocative neo-Nazi marches in the 1970s. He shot and killed a black insurance executive and former Northwestern University basketball coach, Ricky Byrdsong, who was walking with two of his children outside his home. A few minutes later, in another northside suburb, Northbrook, Smith opened

fire on an Asian couple as they tried to pass his Taurus. The couple escaped injury.

On Saturday there were four more shootings in three cities in downstate Illinois. A gunman fired twice at black men on the streets of Springfield, the state capital, on Saturday morning, wounding one man slightly. At 3pm a black minister was hit twice by a drive-by shooter in Decatur, about 100 miles away. The same evening Smith opened fire on a group of six Asian students walking near the campus of the University of Illinois in Urbana, about 80 miles from Decatur, wounding one man in the leg.

On Sunday morning the second murder occurred. Smith lay in wait outside a Korean Methodist church in Bloomington, Indiana, where he was a criminal justice student at Indiana University. When the congregation emerged from the church, he opened fire, killing Won-Joon Yoon, an IU graduate student, then sped away.

Smith, who grew up in the Chicago suburb of Northfield, had been an active white supremacist for several years. He enrolled at the University of Illinois in 1996 and was involved in the distribution of racist leaflets. He ran afoul of the police over drug possession, according to a report in the student newspaper, the *Daily Illini*.

Early in 1998 he was expelled from the University of Illinois. Several months later, in June 1998, Smith joined the World Church of the Creator, a racist operation based in East Peoria, Illinois. He enrolled at Indiana University and gained immediate notoriety as a white racist. Last year on the Fourth of July he was interviewed by the IU student newspaper after distributing white supremacist leaflets at the Bloomington campus, together with other members of the racist church. Smith claimed that "our government has turned against white people."

Several months ago Smith left Bloomington and returned to the Chicago area. He was arrested in late April while distributing racist and anti-Semitic literature in the suburb of Wilmette. A former girlfriend at the University of Illinois said that the timing of the shooting rampage was not an accident. "This is his Independence Day from the government, from everything," she said. "He is not going to stop until he is shot dead."

Another factor that may have precipitated the attacks was the decision last week by an Illinois state hearing board to reject the appeal of Matt Hale, the head of the World Church of the Creator, to be granted a law license. The board said that Hale's beliefs and character made him unfit to practice law. Hale was using the campaign over his law license to gain media coverage and attract recruits. In one publicity stunt he hired prominent Jewish attorney Alan Dershowitz to represent him in the case.

Hale sought to cash in as well on the publicity surrounding Smith's rampage, while evading direct legal culpability. He praised Smith as "a thoughtful, dedicated person who believed essentially in our creed, our religion," while claiming, "I never had any information or inkling he would do anything illegal or violent."

Asked if his church's declared objective—"the survival, expansion and advancement of the white race"—was to blame for Smith's actions, Hale replied, "No more than the Pope in Rome has thought about people bombing abortion clinics."

According to a report by the Anti-Defamation League, the World Church of the Creator was founded in 1973 by Ben Klassen, a former Florida state legislator who was born in the Ukraine. Members of the church were convicted of the murder of a black sailor in Florida, and the victim's family filed a million-dollar lawsuit against the group, prompting Klassen to sell off its property and commit suicide in 1993.

Hale took over the nearly defunct group and had himself elected "Pontifex Maximus" on a ranch in Montana, a state which has become a magnet for white supremacist, militia and neo-Nazi activity. He then moved the group's headquarters to his home in East Peoria, Illinois.

There is some social significance to this location for a racist organization. East Peoria is the home of

Caterpillar Corporation, and has been the scene, over the last 20 years, of a series of bitter strikes, systematically betrayed by the United Auto Workers. More than 10,000 jobs have been eliminated during this period, creating economic hardship on a scale not seen since the 1930s.

National chauvinism and hostility to immigrants and foreigners have been the stock in trade of both the company and the union. Caterpillar has justified its demands for the elimination of jobs and the destruction of conditions by the pressure of foreign competition, especially its main rival Komatsu of Japan. The UAW has replied with calls for protectionism, and the union bureaucracy has sought to stifle rank-and-file criticism by resorting to America-first demagoguery and xenophobia.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact