

Hawaii, Seattle: latest shooting rampages in the US

Jerry White
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An unidentified gunman dressed in camouflage killed two people and severely injured two others at a shipyard office near downtown Seattle Wednesday, in the second shooting at a US workplace in two days. Police using search dogs, helicopters and boats fanned out across a broad area in the industrial and residential area just north of downtown looking for the gunman, who escaped on foot.

On Tuesday morning a Xerox copy machine repairman killed seven coworkers at the company's Honolulu warehouse. The 40-year-old assailant, Byran Uyesugi, was reportedly under severe job stress and may have been close to losing his position at Xerox, where he had worked for the last 15 years. Company officials denied that Uyesugi was being laid off, but the Connecticut-based company has been engaged in a six-year restructuring and has slashed more than 10,000 jobs, or 10 percent of its workforce.

Uyesugi entered a second-floor conference room with a 9 mm pistol and shot five members of his work team. He then walked to another room and killed two more Xerox employees. All of the victims were men, between the ages of 33 and 58. According to one witness, Uyesugi calmly left the office, waving goodbye to those he left uninjured. After a five-hour standoff with police, the gunman gave himself up.

As has been the pattern in previous shooting rampages, friends and neighbors expressed shock and disbelief that Uyesugi was capable of such violence. They described him as a reserved, but nice person, who had a passion for breeding rare fish and building furniture. Underneath, however, Uyesugi apparently suffered from the same type of economic, emotional and psychological distress that has found expression in one violent eruption after another in the US.

Police said he had been turned down for a firearms

permit in 1994 following an arrest for criminal property damage after an argument with coworkers at Xerox. Uyesugi had kicked in some elevator doors and was required to take "anger management" counseling for two weeks.

Harry Friel, an office manager at the state Capitol where Uyesugi regularly repaired photocopy machines, said, "He was frustrated, but in a quiet way. You had to pull it out of him. It eventually came out that he was under stress, something was bothering him, and it wasn't right, but he would shrug it off. He didn't want to talk about it."

Uyesugi lived in a small house in a working class neighborhood with his father, Hiroyuki Uyesugi, a retired postal worker who suffers from a heart condition and prostate cancer, and his brother, a state employee. Police found 18 registered weapons in the house, apparently belonging to Byran Uyesugi, who had participated in rifle competitions in high school.

Officials and news commentators expressed dismay that such violence, which has become a periodic occurrence on the US mainland, could have erupted in Hawaii. "We are the safest city in the nation. We have the lowest crime rate," said Honolulu Mayor Jeremy Harris. "Things like this just don't happen here in paradise. This is something that has shaken the community."

But social conditions in Hawaii are far from idyllic. Like the rest of America, the islands are characterized by severe economic polarization. While Wall Street mogul Charles Schwab is building a \$30 million mansion in the islands, tens of thousands of working people are barely eking out a living. The situation has worsened in part due to the economic crisis in Japan, which traditionally has close ties to Hawaii. Recession in Japan has led to a fall in tourism and other business

relationships.

Many younger families that bought houses during the real estate boom have found themselves unable to pay off loans as the value of their homes has fallen. The official unemployment rate remains well above the national average, while the bulk of new jobs are in the low-wage service sector.

Honolulu-based author Lois-Ann Yamanaka said, “We hear about this stuff on the mainland, we don't hear about this in our own backyard. But it's right under the surface; it's always right there.” Problems of racial and ethnic tension, people working multiple jobs and the seemingly intractable problems of drug abuse are ignored in Hawaii, she said.

The Hawaii shooting only underscores that such violence is a fact of life in every region of America. This year alone has seen more than a dozen multiple shootings, from Columbine High School to a psychiatrist's office in Michigan to the Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles.

In recent years such violence has been centered in the workplace, from the murder of 14 people by a postal worker in Edmond, Oklahoma in 1986 to last July in Atlanta, when a debt-ridden securities day trader killed 12 people and wounded 13, before killing himself.

More than half of American companies have experienced at least one incidence of workplace violence in the past three years, according to a national survey scheduled to be released next week. According to statistics from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, homicide is the second leading cause of death on the job, surpassed only by motor vehicle crashes. While the majority of workplace homicides are robbery-related crimes, 9 percent are committed by coworkers or former coworkers.

These are symptoms of a sick society. Politicians and the media may choose to ignore the social tensions building up in America, but they continue to fester. The political system does not allow any avenue for tens of millions of people to express their concerns about worsening conditions. Both political parties speak for corporate America and support its cost-cutting and downsizing drive. The official labor movement functions openly as the junior partner of big business. Under these conditions, social tensions have tended to erupt in the malignant form of individual violence.



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