

A new round of shootings in the US

Kate Randall
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The latest in the seemingly unending rash of shootings in the US took place last weekend.

At 11 p.m. Friday, March 10, outside a dance at Beach High School in Savannah, Georgia, 19-year-old Darrell Ingram allegedly opened fire as 300 students left the event, hitting three male students. Stacey Smalls, 19, died at the scene and Ramone Kimball, 16, died on Saturday from injuries sustained in the shooting. The other victim was treated and released. Ingram is not a student at Beach High, but school officials said that the three shooting victims were students in the district. Ingram has been charged with two counts of murder and one count of aggravated assault.

On Saturday night, March 11, Robert Leonard, 36, shot himself in the chest with a high-powered rifle as he was being pursued by a highway patrol helicopter in Troy, Missouri, a rural area about 60 miles north of St. Louis. Leonard was being sought in connection with the fatal shootings of four people the day before, when he allegedly walked into a home, argued with his wife who was with another man, and then shot her, the man and another couple at the house. Five young children, including three of the suspect's, who were in the home at the time, were not harmed.

Other shooting incidents over the past two weeks have included:

February 29—a six-year-old student shot and killed another six-year-old, Kayla Rolland, in a classroom at the Buell Elementary School in Mount Morris Township, Michigan.

March 1—Ronald Taylor, 39, went on a rampage in Wilksburg, Pennsylvania at an apartment building and fast-food restaurant, leaving three dead.

March 1—Vincent Smith, 16, was shot and killed by sheriff's deputies in Brown County, Kansas after opening fire on three troopers. The teenager had stolen his father's gun and mother's car from their home in Buffalo, New York and driven 1,000 miles to the Midwest, allegedly fatally shooting a sheriff's deputy about two hours before the shootout with troopers.

March 8—Fred Williams, a former city fireman, called firefighters to his Memphis, Tennessee home, and then ambushed and killed two firefighters and a sheriff's deputy

as they arrived on the scene. The body of the wife of the gunman was later found inside the house.

March 8—John K. Bridgeford, 37, of Champaign, Illinois, allegedly stabbed his 76-year-old father to death and then chased his 75-year-old mother to a nearby elementary school and stabbed her in the arm before being subdued.

March 8—A 16-year-old girl near Worcester, Massachusetts was charged in the bludgeoning death of her mother, a prominent psychiatrist who specialized in criminal behavior.

In a sense, all of these cases are unique. In certain specific ways, intense pressures—financial, personal, psychological—drove the individual perpetrators to snap. But taken as a whole, and as a recurring trend, these tragic incidents say something deeply disturbing about the overall condition of American society.

Certainly economic factors are at work. The six-year-old child in Michigan, for example, was living in horrible conditions of poverty and backwardness. His father was in jail and his mother, evicted from her home and apparently involved with drugs, left him with a relative at a home where stolen weapons were traded for drugs. He found the gun used to shoot his classmate under a blanket and learned how to shoot it by watching a young man who lived in the house.

The conditions of life faced by this child are appalling, and the media and authorities have been unable to ignore his situation when discussing the incident. But how is one to explain what is at work when individuals from better-off circumstances lash out in desperation and violence?

Even bourgeois commentators have noted of late the buildup of tension and anxiety in America. Financial pressures play no small role in this process. Millions of Americans live daily with the threat of losing their jobs. According to Challenger, Gray & Christmas, a firm that tracks job cuts, US companies announced 675,000 layoffs in 1999 and 678,000 in 1998. This compares to 111,285 in 1989.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics, whose figures include layoffs not publicly announced, says the number reached 1.57 million in 1999, and this figure excludes layoffs of less than 50 workers. Even skilled technical workers, such as

software designers, can become obsolete in only a few years' time.

Of late corporations have taken to firing one set of workers—usually the less skilled and those tied to more mundane sectors of the economy—while hiring others, more often than not, workers with skills geared to e-commerce and hi-tech. The practice is called “churning.”

Nowhere in the world is the fate of the population tied so closely to the workings of the market. In this “sink or swim” society, while the nouveau super-rich build mansions and assemble jet fleets, many workers are forced to work two jobs or more, while their incomes are drained by rising costs for day care and other necessities, and they struggle under a mountain of consumer debt.

There are definite economic and social reasons why more than 125 million prescriptions for antidepressants were written in the US in 1999, and drugs to combat “social phobia” are now being advertised on television.

Add to this a culture that glorifies violence and brutality, and the mix becomes explosive. The problem-solving methods of the government provide a model of cruelty and violence—assembly-line executions, vindictive prison terms, tougher laws against juveniles, military aggression around the globe. Violence as the ultimate solution to problems is reinforced on television, in the movies, in video games.

The ready availability of weapons in the US is undoubtedly a contributing factor. According to the US Department of Justice and the National Rifle Association, it is estimated that between 65 million and 80 million Americans own between 200 million and 225 million firearms, close to one weapon for every man, woman and child.

However, the calls of President Bill Clinton and others for stricter gun controls ring increasingly hollow with each tragic incident. The Democrats have seized on the slogan of gun control in order, as one party insider put it, to “make crime a Democratic issue”—i.e., to gain short-term electoral advantage and distract public attention from an examination of the social roots of the increasing number of tragic and violent outbursts.

The reasons why, under more and more difficult conditions, some individuals become unhinged and turn homicidal are complex. But when such episodes become part of daily life, it is a sure sign that the society in question has lost its bearings.

Job insecurity and financial hardship exert a tremendous pressure, but these factors alone cannot explain why the response has to this point taken the form of individual violent outbursts, rather than mass protest against the system responsible for these economic conditions.

The main political parties provide no outlet for the

dissatisfaction dominating much of the population. There are no politicians who even speak of the tremendous social polarization between the rich and poor in America, let alone suggest that anything is wrong or should be changed.

Television and the print media present an image of prosperity and foster an intellectual atmosphere of stifling conformity. To the extent that any social ills are alluded to, the reasons for these problems are never explained. Rather than point to a failing system, the individual is singled out. Invariably the solution proposed is for more police and longer prison terms.

Several decades ago, working people felt they could look to the trade unions or the civil rights movement to defend them, but today these organizations have abandoned any pretense of fighting against the status quo. The political spectrum has shifted so far to the right that a policy of “fiscal responsibility” has replaced any talk of reform, or programs to aid workers and the poor.

While there are some signs of a radicalization—the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle, opposition to the death penalty, outrage over police brutality in New York City and Los Angeles—the dissatisfaction and anger felt by masses of people finds, for the most part, no progressive outlet. Instead the pent-up social discontent and anxiety tend to be expressed in anti-social acts of individual violence.

Tensions will, at a certain point, find expression in a more positive way. Tremendous social and economic forces will come into play, especially when the stock market bubble bursts, as it inevitably must. But an essential prerequisite for channeling these pressures in a progressive direction is the development of a politically conscious element within the working class that has reached the conclusion that there is something fundamentally wrong with the capitalist system itself, and sets out to build a political movement to replace it with a higher, more rational and humane social order.



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