

Hundreds of thousands protest in Washington against gun violence

The Million Mom March: the social and political issues that were not addressed

Barry Grey
17 May 2000

Several hundred thousand people, mostly women, marched in Washington on Mothers Day, Sunday, May 14, and thousands more held local rallies to demand the passage of gun control legislation.

The large turnout at the so-called Million Mom March reflected widespread public concern over the prevalence of gun-related violence in the US. It was also an expression of anger and frustration over the virtual veto-power over Congress wielded by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and allied forces on the right, who oppose legal restrictions on the sale and ownership of guns.

Thousands of those who marched and a number of speakers at the National Mall rally were relatives of people killed or injured in shootings. Hardly a week passes without a shooting rampage somewhere in the US. There have been dozens of incidences of multiple killings at schools, restaurants, work locations and other public venues over the past several years. Most were violent acts carried out by desperate and deranged individuals. Some were politically motivated crimes carried out by fascistic and racist killers.

Beyond such well-publicized incidents are shootings that occur every day as a result of gang warfare, domestic disputes and petty crime. Last but not least are the repeated incidences of police shootings of unarmed youth and workers, usually blacks, Latinos or immigrants.

The death and suffering from gun-related violence are symptomatic of a society riven by social antagonisms and weighed down by acute problems that are not addressed by the official institutions—government, political parties, the media. In a country where 32,000 die every year from gunshot wounds, and some 90 million hand guns are known to exist, it is absurd to argue, in the manner of the gun lobby, that any form of regulation or restriction on firearms is tantamount to tyranny.

Those, including some ostensibly left-wing organizations, who equate the unrestricted right to bear arms with democracy and even proletarian revolution cannot explain why American workers, who have arms in abundance, have never been able on a mass scale to take even the first steps in establishing their political independence from the parties of big business, and exert less political influence than workers in any other industrialized country.

Some form of social control over privately held guns is, in principle, a rational and necessary step. At the same time there are very real grounds for concern over the use to which the government would put vast new data bases of personal information derived from the registration of guns and licensing of gun owners, two of the main demands of the Million Mom March organizers. One of the provisions

of proposed gun legislation would mandate the finger-printing of gun purchasers. That this represents a significant expansion of the police powers of the state is not a mere delusion on the part of gun-control opponents. It is a real threat.

Of this side of the issue, there was barely a hint on Sunday's march. The overall political perspective advanced by the march organizers could hardly have been more superficial or conservative. The entire effort was directed at lobbying Congress to pass the gun-control measures supported by the Clinton administration.

President Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton, who is running for the US Senate from New York, enthusiastically embraced the march, and the march leaders reciprocated. They depicted the White House and the Democratic Party as enlightened defenders of America's children, and all but turned the proceedings at the National Mall into a campaign rally for Vice President Al Gore and the congressional Democrats. The speakers included a number of Democratic officials, such as Rep. Carolyn McCarthy of New York, Rep. Bobby Rush of Illinois, Rep. Patrick Kennedy of Rhode Island and Maryland Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend.

Bill and Hillary Clinton held a Sunday morning White House rally which was attended by the march organizers. Donna Dees-Thomases, who is credited with launching the campaign for the march, is generally described in the media as a typical New Jersey housewife and mother. She has, however, other attributes that make such characterizations highly disingenuous.

Currently on leave from her job as a publicist at CBS, where she works for TV talk-show host David Letterman, she is well-connected in media and public relations circles. She is, moreover, the sister-in-law of New York lawyer Susan Thomases, a close personal friend and political associate of the Clintons. (Susan Thomases worked as an aide in Clinton's 1992 election campaign.)

In his remarks to the organizers, Clinton set the tone for the march, presenting a grossly distorted picture of political relations in the US. The president of the United States, supposedly the most powerful political leader in the world, depicted the struggle between the marchers—and by implication his administration—and the NRA as a David vs. Goliath battle, in which the gun lobby was the embodiment of "power, money and fear."

"Don't be deterred by the political mountain you have to climb," he told the marchers. Clinton's remarks were echoed by speakers at the National Mall later in the day, who presented the NRA as an almost insuperable obstacle to progress. At the same time it was repeatedly pointed out that a large majority of Americans oppose the NRA and

support some form of gun control.

There was no attempt to reconcile the contradiction between popular opposition to the policies of the NRA and the enormous influence of this organization, and the political right in general, over the American political system. This oversight was not accidental, since the first and most glaring fact that would have to be noted is the increasingly pronounced adaptation to the Republican right that has characterized the Clinton presidency and the Democratic Party as a whole.

Notwithstanding the sincerity of those who turned out for the march, the organizers tied the event to a government that has appropriated the law-and-order program of the right wing, championing the death penalty, attacking civil liberties, encouraging the prosecution of children as adults, supporting vindictive prison sentences and fostering a political atmosphere in which police brutality and prison abuse thrive.

It has simultaneously gone far beyond its Republican predecessors in gutting social programs for the poor—eliminating welfare and imposing huge cuts in food stamps and Medicaid. No Democratic administration for a hundred years has pursued a social and economic policy so openly geared to the enrichment of big business and the rich at the expense of the majority of the people. Under Clinton, the Democrats have become the party of fiscal austerity and economic insecurity for the masses, conditions that have nurtured record share values on Wall Street.

In embracing the cause of gun control, Clinton has taken pains to frame the issue as a component part of his administration's anti-crime crusade, aiming thereby to protect his right flank. He followed up his speech to the marchers on Sunday with an address the next day at a Capitol Hill ceremony in honor of policemen killed on duty. Clinton laid out his law-and-order credentials, including the hiring of 100,000 more police, and announced plans to provide every policeman with a bullet-proof vest. He summed up his program with the words: "More police, more prevention, tougher penalties."

None of the speakers at the Million Mom March criticized Clinton's reactionary record on civil and democratic rights, or sought to demarcate their support for gun control from the repressive policies of the administration. Despite a spate in recent months of well-publicized police killings and exposures of corruption and police brutality in New York, Los Angeles and other cities, there was barely a mention from the platform of the death and suffering caused by trigger-happy cops.

Aside from the effort to provide the Clinton administration and the Democratic Party with humanitarian credentials, what characterized the Washington rally was an attempt to present the issue of gun violence as something entirely separate from the underlying social and political crisis in America. These two aspects, are, in fact, closely related, since any objective consideration of the deeper tendencies that give rise to the epidemic of gun violence leads to highly subversive conclusions about the American two-party political system and the social order which it defends.

What are the conditions that breed acts of anti-social violence? How can one explain the repeated eruptions of school shootings, hate crimes and police brutality in the midst of what is officially decreed a period of unprecedented prosperity?

The most important factor is the enormous growth of social inequality. A system which channels the vast bulk of society's resources into the hands of a privileged elite, which flaunts levels of wealth that would make the aristocrats and emperors of old blush, while condemning the vast majority to a life of economic insecurity, if not outright poverty, is a system wracked by social conflict. Such

levels of inequality are incompatible with genuine democracy.

The past 20 years have seen precisely such a sharpening of economic inequality, and hence class antagonisms, in the United States. Under the Clinton administration this process has accelerated, to the point that the country's economic policies are geared entirely to the further enrichment of the most privileged layers at the top of the social ladder. Burning social needs—housing, health care, education—are systematically sacrificed to the demands of the "market," i.e., the interests of corporate magnates, big investors and the most privileged layers of the middle class.

The growth of social inequality has been accompanied by the putrefaction of the political system, which more and more openly functions as the handmaiden of the wealthy elite. Beneath the surface appearance of prosperity, tens of millions of working people struggle to survive. They are increasingly alienated from the political system, which barely acknowledges their problems. At the bottom of society, tens of millions are left to lead lives of desperation and hopelessness.

Inevitably, the ruling class turns to methods of repression to defend its position from the danger of rebellion from below. Hence the pervasiveness of police brutality, the penchant for state executions, and the almost exponential growth in the prison population.

These are the conditions that breed anti-social acts and eruptions of violence. They are rooted in the very nature of the economic system of capitalism, and the political setup that defends that system. Any attempt to address the problem of gun violence that ignores or minimizes these social and political root causes is an exercise in futility, or worse. Concern over the death and suffering caused by guns can, if not informed by a politically conscious critique of American capitalism and its political system, be channeled in a direction that leads to more state repression and greater inequality.

The precondition for a progressive and democratic answer to gun-related violence, as with every other important social question, is the struggle to build an independent political movement of the working class, so that the basic structure and priorities of society can be changed to meet the needs of the masses of people.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact