

Another workplace shooting in the US: Five dead at Chicago Navistar plant

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10 February 2001

On February 5, William D. Baker, 66, forced his way past security at the Navistar International Corporation diesel engine plant in suburban Chicago with a golf bag full of weapons. Once inside he shot and killed four workers, wounded four others and then shot himself to death.

Baker was fired from Navistar in 1994 after management discovered that he and two co-workers and three other men were involved in a scheme to steal \$195,400 in diesel engines and parts from the plant. The FBI busted the operation with the help of one of the workers involved in the theft. Baker was subsequently charged and convicted in 1997 in an unrelated case for sexually molesting a 12-year-old girl, a relative. Authorities failed to revoke his weapons permits following this conviction, and he amassed a huge arsenal that was used in the assault.

Last November, Baker pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit theft from interstate shipments. He was due to begin his five-month prison sentence the day after the shootings. Although apparently angered over his impending sentence, he did not target management or any specific workers in the attack, but fired randomly in the room where he had previously worked. Despite Baker's involvement and conviction in the engine theft scheme, most workers at the plant were shocked by his actions. A former co-worker, who had known him for 20 years, commented, "He was a very nice guy—I couldn't believe what he did."

This latest workplace shooting comes barely a month after an office massacre in Massachusetts that claimed seven lives. The day after Christmas, Michael McDermott, 42, shot and killed four women and three men at Edgewater Technology, a suburban Boston Internet company. The rampage was most likely provoked by the company's plans to garnish McDermott's pay for back taxes owed to the Internal Revenue Service. All of his victims were in the company's personnel and accounting departments.

These are only the most recent incidents of workplace shootings over the past several years, which have included:

December 30, 1999—a Tampa, Florida hotel employee opened fire at his workplace, and then killed another person in an attempted carjacking nearby.

November 3, 1999—a former employee of Northlake Shipyard in Seattle, Washington—reportedly angry over terminated disability benefits—shot and killed two men and wounded two others at his former workplace in downtown Seattle.

November 2, 1999—a Xerox Corp. repairman gunned down seven co-workers at a company warehouse in Honolulu, Hawaii.

August 5, 1999—a delivery truck driver shot and killed two co-workers at a heating and air conditioning company in Pelham, Alabama, then drove to the site of his previous job and killed a third person.

July 29, 1999—a former day-trader bludgeoned his wife and children to death in an Atlanta, Georgia suburb, then killed nine and wounded three at two Atlanta trading brokerage firms before killing himself.

Since 1986, postal workers and former postal employees have shot and killed 39 people at US Postal Service facilities across the country. Such incidents became so common in the early 1990s that the phrase "going postal" was coined to describe an individual losing control and reacting explosively.

The Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) of the US Department of Labor estimates that every year nearly 1,000 workers are murdered and 1.5 million are assaulted at work, both in multiple shootings and in other attacks, including individual murders and robberies. The on-the-job homicide toll amounts to more than 10 percent of all fatal work injuries.

Such is the prevalence of workplace violence that an entire industry has sprung up dedicated to predicting violent incidents and attempting to prevent them. Some of these companies train management to spot potentially dangerous employees, particularly those who have been told they've lost their jobs.

A Web search for "workplace violence" brings up numerous consulting firms specializing in the field. The Workplace Violence Research Institute describes itself as a "full-service provider in workplace violence prevention programs: consulting, training, incident prevention, crisis response and program maintenance." The Peaceful Paths Violence Prevention Training company "offers workplace violence prevention training, as well as verbal and physical self-defense, hostile conflict, and aggression management."

But although violent rampages in the workplace are recognized as a widespread problem, no one in official circles is able to offer a serious explanation for why they continue to take place. In regard to the shootings at Navistar and Edgewater Technology, one can point to specific aggravating factors—an impending prison sentence in Baker's case and the plans to garnish McDermott's wages. In addition, McDermott suffers from mental illness, possibly bipolar disorder, and Baker was a convicted child molester. But such contributing factors in particular cases do not go very far in uncovering the reasons for such rampages having become a

recurring phenomenon in the US.

The more these shootings occur, the more the media tries to explain them as the senseless actions of people who just “snapped.” Were there just one or two such violent outbursts in the course of a decade, this might be an acceptable interpretation. But under conditions where barely a month goes by without another incident taking place, such explanations are obviously inadequate. The more these tragedies occur, the more they cry out for a serious examination of American society itself.

What it is about life in the US that drives people to take such desperate and violent action—against their coworkers, supervisors or people they barely know? Why does emotional and mental distress take such homicidal forms, why in America more than any other industrialized country, why so often in the workplace, and why today more than in previous periods? Such questions are a closed book.

Tremendous insecurity and tension pervade the workplace in America. In the midst of the economic expansion of the past decade, the incidence of mass shootings on the job have, if anything, increased. The so-called economic miracle of the '90s came at a price for most workers. A massive accumulation of wealth for a small stratum at the top of society was accompanied by longer working hours, more speedup, growing debt and added stress for the majority of working Americans.

US workers have virtually no recourse against layoffs, and remain on the job at the mercy of their employers. Wages for manufacturing workers have stagnated for two decades, trailing behind the earnings of workers in Western Europe and Japan. Many of the jobs created over the past decade have been in the low-paying service industry sector, or have come in the form of temporary or “contract” positions that offer no pensions or medical benefits.

Even at the height of the business boom, corporate downsizing continued and economic insecurity remained a permanent feature of life for millions of workers, both white-collar and blue-collar. The growth in productivity of the past decade came at the expense of the real wages and living conditions of workers, and was accompanied by an enormous increase in society inequality.

For the most part these social tensions have found their expression, not in political opposition or social protest, but in the individual responses of workers, leading in extreme cases to desperate and socially destructive acts.

Expressions of collective, popular discontent have receded over the past two decades. The organized resistance of the working class to their employers has been repeatedly sabotaged by the trade unions—the AFL-CIO, the UAW, the Teamsters—the organizations that are supposed to represent workers' interests.

The 1980s saw intense battles by workers against union-busting, wage-cutting and concessions. But time and again these struggles were betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy, which ever more overtly collaborated with management inside the factories and other workplaces. As a result of the collapse of the unions as organizations that even in a limited way defend the interests of working people, employees have come to feel, with justification, that they face the employers on their own, with no organization backing them. The fact that the UAW is organized at a plant—such

as at Navistar's Melrose Park facility—in no way means that the workers have any genuine representation.

The collusion of the trade union leadership with management has gone hand in hand with the political suppression of the working class, through the alliance between the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. Workers find themselves saddled with an official leadership that refuses to defend their jobs or basic rights, and with no political outlet to express their genuine interests. In a society riven with social antagonisms, the feelings and aspirations of working people can find no expression—either in the main political parties, the media or the established civil rights organizations.

It is under these conditions that deranged acts on the part of desperate individuals can and do proliferate.

The coming months will undoubtedly see an intensification of the economic and social pressures that have led to such on-the-job eruptions in the past. Although Monday's shooting cannot be directly linked to recent economic changes, it should be noted that Navistar, like many other US companies, is in the midst of downsizing, announcing last year that it would eliminate 3,100 of its 17,000 employees. This is a scenario that is being repeated in a wide array of businesses across the US—from manufacturing to service industries to the technology sector.

This does not, however, mean that the sharpening of class antagonisms will simply lead to more individual acts of violence. On the contrary, the experiences of the past two decades have created the objective conditions for the emergence of a new political and social movement of working people, based on the realization that it is the capitalist profit system itself that lies at the root of the tremendous tensions and pervasive inequality that dominate life in the US.

Many myths about American society are being shattered by the actions of the ruling elite, whose abandonment of elementary democratic principles was exhibited for all to see in the recent presidential election. Growing layers of workers will inevitably begin to question their society more deeply, and look for political alternatives to the profit system. The reemergence of the working class as an organized social force, based on a new, socialist perspective, will be the hallmark of the coming period.



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