A new round of school shootings in the US

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Recent days have witnessed another eruption of shootings at high schools in the US. The latest deadly rampage took place March 5, when 15-year-old Charles “Andy” Williams opened fire at Santana High School in Santee, California, killing two students and injuring another thirteen.

Within hours of the Santana High shooting, a 14-year-old shot a female classmate in the shoulder in the lunchroom of a Catholic school in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The injured girl was hospitalized and released last Thursday.

Two other schools in California reportedly faced threats. On March 6, the day after the Santee shooting, police in Stockton responded to reports that a sixth-grader had taken a gun into school and ordered a lock-down while a search was conducted. That same day a student at a high school in Yuba County reported to administrators that a classmate had told him he was planning to shoot several people on school grounds.

Another student, this time near Charlotte, North Carolina, was arrested March 8 for allegedly e-mailing bomb threats to 13 high schools, warning that the bombs were set to detonate in an hour.

Since 1996 there have been 16 shooting incidents at US schools, resulting in the deaths of 35 students and 17 teachers and administrators, and the wounding of 70 others. The most gruesome assault took place at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999, when students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold fatally shot 12 students and 1 teacher, and wounded 23 others before taking their own lives.

Many schools now have extensive preventative systems in place, including expanded counseling, hotlines where students can phone in anonymous tips, and beefed-up security. Metal detectors and backpack checks, once only seen in inner-city schools, are now more commonplace in middle-class suburban areas.

Although Santana High School has not required students to pass through metal detectors, it does have anonymous sign-in sheets for students to report threats, the principal has undergone SWAT training, and a sheriff's deputy is assigned part-time to the school. Seven full-time campus supervisors walk the school grounds and the district has invested in extra phones, radios and speakers to upgrade security communications. All of these measures, however, failed to stop a student from gunning down two of his schoolmates last week.

According to government reports, while overall school violence has declined, mostly due to a drop in incidents in urban areas, violent armed attacks on the part of individual students have continued unabated, most of them occurring at suburban schools. What is it that is driving these students to take such violent and desperate measures? What does it say about their lives, the communities in which they live, and American society as a whole?

Consider the case of the latest young gunman and his hometown of Santee, California. The town of 60,000 lies 20 miles northeast of San Diego, in Southern California, and was not even on the map until 20 years ago. Most families own their own homes and the average annual income is $60,000. Many of Santee's middle-class residents moved there to avoid the crime and violence of large cities like San Diego and Los Angeles, and to send their kids to better schools.

Andy Williams, whose parents are divorced, recently moved from Maryland to Santee to live with his father. A small, skinny kid, he had been picked on and teased at his previous school and his mother and father thought things might be better for him in a new town. But the bullying persisted at Santana High.

Classmates would often taunt him because of his height—he is barely five feet tall. “He was picked on all the time,” said one student, “because he was one of the scrawniest guys. People called him freak, dork, nerd, stuff like that.” A week prior to the shooting rampage, Andy's skateboard was stolen.

Much emphasis is now being placed by the media on the role that bullying plays in provoking such incidents, and in this case it apparently played a part. But bullying in schools did not begin in the 1990s. What did begin, as a definite social phenomenon, was the decision by troubled teenagers to lash out in a homicidal, and often suicidal, fashion against classmates and school officials. (According to the latest reports, Williams told police investigators he had reserved a bullet for himself and intended to take his own life after shooting down his—apparently randomly selected—victims.)

What predominates in both the official response and the media coverage of the latest school shootings is a sense of bewilderment and helplessness. There remains the predictable undercurrent of law-and-order repression—the assertion that Williams will be tried as an adult and put away for life, the call for even more punitive measures against juvenile offenders, etc. But even these statements are generally qualified by the admission that such measures have thus far failed to stem the recurrence of such bloody incidents.

There is understandable and legitimate concern for the safety of both children and adults at the nation's schools. The issue presents itself as a real dilemma, without any obvious solution. It is unreasonable to reject out of hand the need for certain prophylactic measures against gun violence in schools, as well as advanced planning for dealing with such events if and when they occur. On the other hand, the vast majority of Americans are correctly wary of proposals from law-and-order zealots to turn the schools into militarized zones, and ride roughshod over democratic and privacy rights in the name of security.

The public discussion of school violence, as filtered through the media, sheds little light and offers even less of a rational and humane approach toward a solution. That is because the media and the political establishment dare not touch on, let alone seriously address, the fact that such a phenomenon must inevitably reflect more basic problems and contradictions within American society. Have we not been living in a period of unprecedented prosperity, when the “world's only superpower” sets the standard for the entire world of a “successful” society?

The recurrence of deadly violence in the schools makes a mockery of this cartoonish image of social reality in the US, which is a major reason why the official arbiters of public opinion have such difficulty dealing with it. To seriously come to grips with the problem of school violence requires an examination of the pressures bearing down on young people, and how they reflect the underlying premises and structure of American society as a whole.

Teenagers have always been pressured to “fit in.” But in a town like

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Santee, California—similar to so many “good” communities across America—what does this mean today? Even more than in the past, young people are judged by their cars, their clothes, their athletic performance, their acceptance by the “in” clique.

This pressure to conform is accompanied by powerful and widespread feelings of disaffection, alienation and even hopelessness. Andy Williams, the shooter at Santana High, seems to have been dominated by alienation and a lack of direction. His friends have told the press that he was part of a group of teens whose main social activity was to gather across the street from the school, where they smoked marijuana and drank tequila.

A classmate of Williams told the *New York Times*, “In the last couple months, he was drunk a lot, and smoked a ton of pot, but I think that's because everybody was always jagging on him.” This form of socializing apparently didn't seem out of the ordinary to Williams' friends and acquaintances.

Of course, only a very few of the legions of high school youth who feel alienated and adrift reach the point of taking their own life, or the lives of others. It is, nevertheless, a sobering fact that the second and third most common causes of death among American teens, after automobile accidents, are suicide and homicide, respectively.

The violent eruptions of the few, when they become a recurring phenomenon, must, by any rational standard, be taken to reflect a more general crisis. And a crisis of belief, identity, psychological and social orientation among the youth must reflect a malaise within the broader society. The youth are not some separate breed, apart from the adult population. Rather, they are in many ways the most sensitive and vulnerable social layer. Just emerging from childhood, and making the always conflicted transition to adulthood, they are like a social barometer, reflecting and expressing in a relatively unmediated way the moods and tensions that form the general social-psychological environment.

When the present generation of baby boomers was coming of age, it had to make its way in a society that was far from idyllic. America in the 1960s and early 1970s was a brutal class society, as it is today, but there were important differences. The consensus within the political and corporate elite remained within the general framework inherited from the New Deal liberal reformism of the Depression years. Within the ruling circles, the belief still prevailed that American capitalism, based on its global economic supremacy, could afford to wage a Cold War—as well as regional shooting wars—abroad, while addressing at least to some extent domestic problems of poverty, poor housing, unemployment, racial discrimination, etc. The official liberal ideology, as propounded by political figures such as Kennedy and Johnson, articulated a certain optimism about the possibilities for improving society, and making it more egalitarian and democratic.

Young people coming of age imbibed this political atmosphere, for the most part unconsciously. Certain conceptions of social solidarity, equality, progress were, so to speak, “in the air.” There was a sense that the life of each individual was bound up with a greater social whole, that one's life derived some meaning from a more general effort to achieve social progress.

It was, moreover, a period of great social struggles—the civil rights movement, militant labor struggles—and organizations existed that claimed, with some justification, to speak for the interests of the broad masses of working people—the civil rights organizations, the trade unions.

It quite quickly became apparent to many young people—who are, in general, acutely sensitive to hypocrisy in all its forms—that the progressive rhetoric of the liberal political establishment, concentrated in the Democratic Party, was riddled with contradictions and deceit. The Vietnam War played a major role in this process of political awakening, clarification and radicalization.

But the youth at that time had a certain frame of reference—general notions of socialism, radical reform, revolution—through which they could channel their disaffection and anger with official society and the political establishment.

The turbulent years of the 1960s and 1970s, however, failed to produce revolutionary change. The working class was not yet able to overcome the influence of the reactionary labor bureaucracies—Stalinist, social democratic and trade union—that dissipated its strength and politically disoriented it. The price for the defeat of revolutionary struggles and aspirations internationally was a ferocious counterattack by the American ruling class, embodied politically in the Reagan administration—an anti-working-class offensive that has been continuing ever since, under Democratic as well as Republican presidents.

This ruling class offensive was given impetus by the culminating betrayal of Stalinism, in the form of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The tragic final act of the epoch-making October Revolution gave the organs of capitalist rule new grist for their propaganda mill—proclaiming the final “defeat” of the socialist project.

What has the American establishment put in the place of its old canon of liberal reformism? The ethos of the stock market, of blind greed and Social Darwinian contempt for the “losers” in the human rat race. Both parties, the Democrats as well as the Republicans, have embraced this creed, lurching ever more to the right and attacking whatever remains of the social reforms of the past. At the same time the official civil rights organizations have become part of the establishment, abandoning any defense of the mass of minority workers and youth, and the trade unions have become bureaucratic semi-corpses.

All of this has taken its toll on the consciousness of working people in America, and especially the youth, who see no force with which they can identify or look to champion their rights and aspirations. Is it any wonder that many youth seem to drift aimlessly?

The eruptions of wanton violence at American schools are a particularly morbid expression of a deep-going social crisis. This crisis cannot be solved by band-aid measures, whether in the form of more repression or more lectures. What young people need, above all, is an understanding of the source of the pressures that bear down on them, that is, the nature of capitalist society, as well as the lessons of the great historical experiences of the twentieth century, and, on this basis, a new perspective for social and political struggle to truly improve their lives and the lives of their fellow human beings.

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