

More than 30 dead at Virginia Tech

Worst shooting incident in US history

David Walsh
17 April 2007

In a tragic episode Monday morning, the worst shooting incident in American history, a gunman shot and killed at least 32 students and faculty and wounded dozens of others on the campus of Virginia Tech university in Blacksburg, Virginia. In the end, the gunman turned the gun on himself.

It is too early to draw any specific conclusions about the incident, the identity of the killer has not even been established. One can only express horror at the event and sympathy for the victims and their families. Thousands of lives have been changed permanently and the peaceful university town will never be the same again.

The shooting at Virginia Tech surpasses the death toll at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999 and at the University of Texas in 1966, when ex-Marine Charles Whitman opened fire from the top of a clock tower. Another atrocity has been committed, another new American record has been set.

Once again, global television audiences have watched scenes of bloodied young people being carried out of US school buildings, while others run or stumble, distraught, dazed. A videotape captures the dreadful sound of a weapon being fired carefully and with calculation.

There are already certain disturbing questions. According to news reports, the first shootings took place at a coed dormitory shortly after 7 am Monday morning. Two individuals, one male and one female, were shot and killed at West Ambler Johnston Hall, a residence that houses nearly 900 students. Police arrived on the scene and began to investigate. They decided, officials explained at a press conference, that the incident was isolated and contained. Why was such a conclusion drawn?

There appears to have been no systematic effort to

warn students that a gunman might still be loose on the campus. Students were allowed to go about their business on campus, unalerted to the danger. An email, blandly reporting that a “shooting incident” had occurred and urging the “university community ... to be cautious,” was not sent out until 9:26 am, only minutes before the second, far deadlier killing spree erupted.

The gunman proceeded to shoot and kill some 30 students and faculty in Norris Hall, a sprawling engineering and science building a half-mile from the dormitory. Some of the injured jumped out of windows to escape the rampage.

Student Jason Piatt told CNN, “I’m pretty outraged that someone died in a shooting in a dorm at 7 o’clock in the morning and the first e-mail about it had no mention of locking down the campus, no mention of canceling classes.”

MSNBC interviewed Derek O’Dell, another Virginia Tech student, who said the gunman was in his 20s and wearing a black leather jacket. O’Dell was inside a classroom in Norris Hall when the gunman entered and started firing. O’Dell was shot in the arm. “He came into the room and started shooting,” the student explained. “He let off a full round. I was one of 10 to 15 people in our classroom to get shot. He didn’t say anything, he just started shooting.” The gunman left and students rushed to barricade the room, but the man returned and fired his weapon some more.

Tiffany Otey reported that she and 18 other students were taking a test when the gunfire broke out. The group of students locked themselves in a professor’s office. She described “continuous gunfire,” as many as “50 shots,” and the chaos in the building as students ran, screaming.

The BBC’s web site received numerous reports from students at Virginia Tech, providing their reactions and

accounts.

Bethany Zimmerman writes, “Students are now coming back to the dorms. I have a friend who is in the building behind Norris and is surrounded by students and faculty who were in Norris. One girl expressed how she saw many bloody bodies. We are being advised to stay in the dorm, but information from the University is slow, although the news coverage has been the best source of information. Why weren’t we warned after the FIRST shooting?”

“One of my friends,” recounts Brandon, “was in one of the classrooms where the shooting occurred, and the scene he described was utter chaos. It sounded like a scene from a movie, something that you watch but never expect to happen to you, or to anyone that you know.”

Jamal Albarghouti, a Palestinian civil engineering graduate student, captured some of the most troubling video of the scene, on his cell phone camera. On the footage one can see police around Norris Hall and hear the slow, popping sounds of gunfire. Albarghouti, originally from the West Bank, told CNN that he had been in cities where violence had erupted, including in the Occupied Territories and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where a terrorist bombing took place. He never expected such an incident on the campus of Virginia Tech. “Blacksburg is one of the nicest towns I’ve ever been to. You can’t imagine, everyone is so sad, so shocked.”

The Virginia Tech campus, located some 240 miles southwest of Washington, DC, was locked down on the first day of school last August during a manhunt for an escaped inmate who killed a hospital guard and a sheriff’s deputy. In recent weeks, there have been two bomb threats. Authorities have no idea yet whether the threats and Monday’s shootings are related.

It should be noted that Virginia Tech has close historical connections to the US military. According to an article in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in May 2005, the university has “become the nation’s top producer of Navy and Marine Corps officers among universities and colleges with the exception of the US Naval Academy.” From 2000 to 2005, Virginia Tech produced nearly 220 naval and marine officers.

The Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets is one of only six senior military colleges outside the federal military academies. The university is one of only two in the

country that maintains a full time Corps of Cadets within a large university. According to the latter’s web site, “Since 1872, the Corps of Cadets has produced outstanding leaders for the Commonwealth and the Nation. Seven of our alumni have earned the Medal of Honor, a number exceeded only by West Point and Annapolis. Over 100 of our graduates have been promoted to General and Flag Officer rank.”

Following the massacre in Blacksburg, George W. Bush issued an empty statement, declaring that “Schools should be places of safety and sanctuary and learning. When that sanctuary is violated, the impact is felt in every American classroom and every American community. Today, our nation grieves with those who have lost loved ones at Virginia Tech. We hold the victims in our hearts, we lift them up in our prayers, and we ask a loving God to comfort those who are suffering today.” This is from a man who loses no sleep over bombs dropped on Iraqi or Afghan schools.

A former FBI agent, interviewed on one of the cable television talk shows, asserted that such incidents were “Part of the risk of having a free and open society.... These are rare and unusual events.” Not so rare or unusual. Workplace, high school and campus shootings are an all-too prominent feature of modern American life.

Whatever the immediate circumstances prove to be, clearly, this incident, like Columbine and the other tragedies, is an expression of deeper social tendencies, of a profoundly dysfunctional society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact