

Six dead after yet another US school shooting

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On Thursday afternoon, a mass shooting took place at Northern Illinois University (NIU), in DeKalb, a small city located about one hour's drive west of Chicago. At the time of writing, six have died, including the killer, and another fifteen remain wounded, some in critical condition.

At about 3 p.m. a gunman, later identified as Steven Kazmierczak, age 27, emerged dressed in black from behind a projection screen on the stage of a small lecture hall and opened fire in a seemingly random manner, before shooting himself. He carried a pump-action shotgun, which he had smuggled onto campus in a guitar case, as well as three handguns.

Kazmierczak was a recent graduate of NIU with a degree in Sociology and was currently a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where he studied social work. He purchased some of his weapons less than one week earlier in Champaign, roughly 170 miles to the south.

As of yet little is known about the motivation behind the shooting. There was no known connection to the particular class he attacked. Kazmierczak had evidently recently quit taking psychological medications and had become "erratic." Early accounts suggest that he had been considered a good, even "outstanding," student at NIU, where he had been on the Dean's list. He had written papers on self-injury in prison, and was vice president of a campus organization dedicated to the study of criminology.

Discovering the details of the killer's motivations and his personal history will provide little comfort to the grieving families and friends of the victims. The lives of these students have been tragically snuffed out, and with them hopes and dreams and unknown possibilities. Many more students have been traumatized.

Those killed in the Cole Hall geology class include Ryanne Mace, 19; Gayle Dubowski, Daniel Parmenter and Catalina Garcia, all 20; and Julianna Gehant, 32. All were from Illinois. The class's teacher, a graduate student, was injured.

Witnesses to the UNI killings described a terrifying scene. "The door opened up—the emergency-exit door on the stage. He came in with a shotgun on his hip and just opened fire right into the crowd," said student Shane Pope. "I was five feet from the door when the second shotgun blast went off," said John Giovanni. "Once I ran out, I heard kids following me that weren't too far behind me saying that they were bleeding."

"I personally army-crawled halfway up the aisle," said 20-year-old Lauren Carr. "I said I could get up and run or I could die here. I heard this girl scream, 'Run, he's reloading the gun!'"

NIU is a major public university, with an enrollment of over 25,000. Most of the students come from Illinois, many from the nearby metropolitan Chicago area. In addition to the student population DeKalb has a racially mixed and largely working class population of some 40,000. It is an old railroad city and has a history of industrial production. At one time it was the center of barbed wire fence production in the US. Now the university is the city's most important employer.

Whatever motivated Kazmierczak to open fire upon a class of undergraduate students, the tragedy at NIU fits into a larger pattern of school shootings and mass homicides that have been occurring with heightening frequency across the U.S.

The most devastating of these occurred last spring when a student at Virginia Tech University shot and killed 32 of his peers before turning the gun on himself. Only last week, a man in a small Missouri town went to a City Council meeting and opened fire, killing five before security personnel shot and killed him.

In fact, school and workplace shootings have become so frequent in the US as to oftentimes escape the attention of the national media—unless the death toll is high. The mass shooting at DeKalb was the fourth reported US school shooting *in the last week*. Just two days earlier, a 14-year-old shot and left brain dead a junior high school classmate in Oxnard, California. On Monday, a 17-year-old critically wounded a classmate during gym class in

Memphis, Tennessee. And last Friday, February 8, a woman opened fire in a classroom at Louisiana Technical College, killing two students then herself.

The usual explanations will go only so far. We can expect the media to sift through the details of Kazmierczak's life. He will be demonized, but perhaps a story of personal trauma or psychological torment will also emerge. The media have already found their way to the home of Kazmierczak's father in Florida, who has pleaded to be left alone, and news crews have descended on the University of Illinois campuses at DeKalb and Urbana, interviewing classmates and professors.

It is true that in the US killings are made easier by the ready availability of firearms and ammunition designed to kill human beings, as opposed to most other countries where stricter regulation prevails. No doubt some Democratic Party politicians will focus on this, while the National Rifle Association and gun advocates will absurdly draw the opposite conclusion, calling for the arming of teachers and students in defense against such attacks.

But as the number of school and workplace shootings in the US pile up, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny that the violence reveals something beyond just the maniacal behavior of the individual perpetrator. The frequency of these events stands as morbid testament to a society in an advanced state of decay.

Americans are subject to sharp and growing social tensions. Daily life for tens of millions is a struggle for survival in which the solitary individual confronts powerful and seemingly incomprehensible social forces. This is especially true for students, with increasing numbers graduating with tens of thousands of dollars of tuition debt and diminished hopes of obtaining a job in their field of study.

The shared or collective means through which individuals once expressed grievances—trade unions, the offices of local politicians, student and civil rights movements, and so on—no longer serve even the limited function they once did.

From youth Americans are constantly told that all problems are individual. The largest section at any book store and much of TV airtime peddle the thin broth of “self help”—from family relationships, to spirituality, to moneymaking. The consciousness that one's own life problems are in fact the peculiar individual expressions of difficulties confronting millions—that my troubles are not mine alone—is in short supply.

Then there is the multibillion-dollar industry run by

religious charlatans that aims to convince that problems can be resolved through a “personal” relationship with God. In the absence of progressive and social outlets, acute social tensions have taken on increasingly malignant forms.

At the same time, the US ruling elite has worked assiduously to benumb Americans to violence. Politicians and media talking heads promote military violence as the first resort of foreign policy. In Iraq, this violence has resulted in the deaths of at least one million men, women and children.

Barack Obama, the likely Democratic Party presidential nominee and current senator whose constituents include the students and workers of DeKalb, has criticized the invasion from the standpoint of the interests of US imperialism. While criticizing the Bush administration on tactical grounds, he has in fact called for increased military spending and putting “more boots on the ground”—political jargon for more military operations and killing.

The assault on culture plays its role as well. On TV and radio, in movies and video games and in print, the media appeals to the lowest common denominator and the basest aspects of being. Above all else, they promote a culture of violence. We must ask: where do Americans, and in particular the youth, experience beauty in their daily lives? The public funding for the arts and parks is insignificant when compared to the tens of billions doled out for the massive killing operation in Iraq and for tax cuts to the obscenely wealthy.

In the aftermath of the NIU killings, the ruling elite will call for greater doses of the same bad medicine. Suggestions have already been made to further militarize high schools and colleges, installing metal detectors and employing more police. President Bush, as is his wont, appealed to religious obscurantism, calling on Americans to pray.

Students and workers must look deeper.



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