

US: Workplace shooting leaves six dead in Henderson, Kentucky

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According to police, around midnight on Tuesday, a disgruntled 25-year-old worker shot his supervisor outside the Henderson, Kentucky plastics plant where he worked. Wesley Neal Higdon then went back inside and shot five other co-workers, before taking his own life.

One of the victims was declared dead at the scene, and four others died of their wounds at local hospitals. A sixth victim remains in hospital in stable condition.

Media accounts portray Higdon as an argumentative, alienated young man. Local police allege the rampage was premeditated and that Higdon called his girlfriend two hours before the attack to inform her that he was going to kill his boss.

According to the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, Higdon was a press operator at the Atlantis Plastics factory. Several hours before the shooting, he reportedly got into an argument with a co-worker.

The newspaper said Wednesday that when supervisor Kevin Taylor escorted Higdon out of the plant and tried to send him home, the latter took a weapon from his vehicle and shot the supervisor. Then Higdon walked into the break room and fatally shot four other workers and wounded at least one more before going onto the factory floor and shooting the co-worker with whom he'd argued. (Some news accounts suggest that Higdon had been sent home over an argument with a co-worker and came back with the handgun.)

Along with Higdon and Taylor, the dead were 25-year-old Trisha Mirelez, 26-year-old Rachael Vasquez and 28-year-old Joshua Hinojosa, all from the small town of Sebree, just south of Henderson; and Israel Monroy, 29, of Henderson. Monroy's sister, Noelia Monroy, was also wounded in the attack and remains hospitalized.

Henderson police sergeant John Nevels told the

media that from surveillance footage, the shootings in the break room appeared indiscriminate. "He just started shooting at everybody. He just went in there to kill people," Nevels said. Some of the victims were shot multiple times—a fact that may indicate the gunman took time to reload during the shooting. Nevels told the Henderson *Gleaner* that employees could be seen trying to take cover under chairs and tables in the video.

Atlantis Plastics chief executive Bud Philbrook told the *Associated Press* that the gunman did not have a record of outbursts or "untoward activity or performance prior to this situation." Philbrook commented, "It's just total shock. It's something you read about in the paper."

According to the local police investigators, Higdon had been the subject of disciplinary action for poor performance at the plant before, but at the time of this writing there have been no details released.

As with all such social tragedies, the community involved has expressed a sense of shock over the apparently random violence. All of the victims were young, mostly poor men and women, the youngest only 22.

As of this writing, few details about Higdon's personal history and state of mind have emerged, although one local television station reported that on his MySpace page Higdon indicated a desire to meet "God" and "Charles Manson," among others.

Features of this tragic shooting bear some undeniable similarities to the dozens of other workplace and school massacres that have occurred throughout the US in the past few years. In 2007 alone, the Violence Policy Center (VPC) estimates that more than 1,100 Americans died in murder-suicides.

While the relationship between the individual-

psychological and the social is extremely complex, that such incidents averaged nine per week during the VPC's six-month study period suggests that there are social components to the violence and self-destruction of individuals such as Wesley Higdon.

Henderson is a small western Kentucky city on the Ohio River and forms part of the Evansville, Indiana metropolitan area. Its local population is about 28,000, mostly composed of low-income and working poor families.

Henderson's economic history—and its current impoverishment—is typical of many central US towns. A century ago the town established itself as a major international producer and exporter of tobacco. Many industrial plants located in the city because of its port and elevation over the flood-prone river.

Presently about one-third of the jobs in Henderson are in manufacturing, particularly in automotive and appliance parts production. The town is also a major agricultural and coal center in the state.

Although thousands of residents are industrial workers, wages are not high. According to the most recent Census Bureau figures, 16.5 percent of Henderson's population lives below the federal poverty line, and the median household income is \$30,400 per year. Per capita income averages \$17,900.

Auto parts workers in Henderson organized by the United Auto Workers maintained a four year-long strike against Accuride Corporation over inadequate wages and benefit cuts, only to have their strike pay cut off by the UAW in 2001. They were forced to accept major concessions.

Atlantis Plastics' Henderson plant, which specializes in injection molding parts for use in appliances and building materials such as house siding, has been subjected to heavier workloads after the firm closed another injection molding plant in Warren, Ohio in 2007.

Contributing to the bleak mood within wide layers of the population are spiraling living expenses, heightening job insecurity, recession and the prospect of endless wars and increasingly oppressive conditions within the US. The brutality of the powers that be, as well as the coarseness and crudity of popular culture, helps inure many to the terrible consequences of violent behavior.

None of these social facts by itself, or even in

combination, fully explains why a given individual suffers a mental collapse. There are many specific and mediating factors. Only a tiny handful of those subjected to generally similar conditions break down completely under their weight and commit anti-social acts. Nonetheless, the prevailing deeply unhealthy psychological climate in the US, along with the immense economic strains, obviously plays a role in leaving the most mentally unstable vulnerable to such explosions.



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