

Finland: Second school shooting in less than a year

Striking similarity

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On Tuesday, September 23, at approximately 11a.m., Finland was hit by the second mass shooting episode in less than 12 months, this time at a college in the town of Kauhajoki.

Matti Saari, a 22-year old culinary arts student, arrived at the college dressed in black wearing a ski mask and fired repeatedly into a classroom where students were taking an exam. He then threw homemade petrol bombs, causing a fire in the building, before continuing to fire into other classrooms. An hour after the initial shooting, he was found by police with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

The first reports placed the death toll at nine, but this was later to increase to ten victims and the gunman himself, who died later in a hospital in Tampere. Some of the victims were killed directly by gunshot wounds, while others died in the fire started by Saari. A number of the bodies were so badly burned that formal identification took several days.

Last November in the town of Jokela, an 18-year-old killed fellow students and a teacher at his own school before shooting himself. The re-occurrence of an almost identical shooting barely one year later has prompted criticism from media outlets and calls from politicians for tighter gun controls in a country where personal gun ownership is high.

At the age of 15, Finns are permitted to own a firearm, and Finland has the third highest level of gun ownership in the world, behind only the United States and Yemen. Prime Minister Vanhanen, after paying his condolences to the victims and their families, noted that a tightening of the gun laws was necessary and proposed a ban on certain types of firearms.

The mayor of Kauhajoki expressed his support for such a law. Antti Rantacocco told the BBC, “It’s important to change the law. Why do those young people need those guns?”

The interior ministry is believed to be bringing forward legislation that will increase restrictions on handgun ownership by the spring.

Others have called for increased monitoring of the Internet. The day after the shooting, it was announced that the National Bureau of Investigations (NBI) would step up its surveillance of the Internet for at least one month following the killings. While reports state that no extra powers will be given to the organisation to carry this out, there is growing pressure for such powers to be granted. Already the NBI has claimed that it does not possess the resources to maintain sufficient levels of monitoring of the Internet, presenting a justification for an increased surveillance apparatus.

In spite of the legitimate outrage felt by many at the killing, such calls for further law and order measures will do little to prevent something similar happening in the future. Moreover, they do nothing to uncover the causes for such tragedies. Many of those calling for greater restriction of access to firearms are forced to admit that easy access to guns has been the case in Finland for a long time due to the popularity of hunting in the country and that gun crime has always remained relatively low. Why then, in the space of less than a year, have two such shootings taken place? This is a question that receives little attention.

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One of the things most evident in the latest crime is its almost identical character to last November’s shooting, not only in the actions of the two gunmen but in the motivations for the killings. Pekka-Eric Auvenen, the gunman at Jokela high school last November, posted a number of videos on the Internet in which he professed a hatred for humanity. Claiming that the vast majority of people were merely “robots” and “vegetables,” he asserted that only three percent of society was suited to rule by virtue of their

“natural” superiority.

Upon raiding Saari’s flat shortly after the latest shooting, police discovered two suicide notes he had handwritten before leaving for the college. In one he describes his outlook on the world as “misanthropic,” stating, “I hate the human race, I hate mankind, I hate the whole world and I want to kill as many people as possible.”

Reports emerging from students who were in the classroom at the time of the shooting and managed to escape add to the picture of Saari having an extremely disturbed personality, with one witness stating that he appeared to be enjoying himself. Jari Neulaniemi, the police chief inspector in charge of the investigation explained, “He set off with killing in mind, and what we have heard confirms this. He carried out his deed in cold blood and shot and killed classmates that he knew well.”

His notes also claimed that he had been planning the shooting since 2002. This date is worth bearing in mind, since it coincides with the killing of six passers-by by a 19-year old who blew himself up in a shopping mall in Vantaa, a suburb of Helsinki. He too had mental problems.

Saari’s video postings on the Internet are aggressive and reveal a desire for violence. In the clips he appears dressed in black firing a handgun. In one he states, “You will die next,” before turning and firing directly at the camera. These images prompted police to call him in for an interview only the day before he committed the murders.

It has been suggested that the two gunmen were in contact before Auvenen committed the murders at Jokela high school last November. Indications that Saari was involved in a loose network of Internet contacts who sympathised with the actions of school shooters, not only in Finland but across the world, have also appeared.

Finland is regularly cited as one of the world’s wealthiest societies, a classic example of the Nordic system of a “caring” capitalism. The reality is very different. Since the 1990s, when Finland was forced to reorient itself to the world economy as a result of globalisation and the collapse of the USSR, social programmes and public spending have come under attack from successive governments, attempting to improve competitiveness. Finland has been cited as the most competitive country in the world on at least four occasions since 2002.

One area where these cuts have been felt particularly is in the public provision of healthcare, including treatment for those with mental health issues.

Waiting lists for psychiatric care are often lengthy. Conscribed into the Finnish armed forces in 2006 to undertake his military service, shortly afterwards Saari was transferred to the so-called E category, a designation which permits national service to be postponed for two years at

which point the person is called back to determine their fitness to continue. One common cause for such a designation is mental health issues, although the armed forces have refused to confirm if this was indeed the case. It has been revealed that Saari had been prescribed anti-depressants in the past, but had been unable to see a psychiatrist due to patient queues.

Additionally, Saari was constantly bullied throughout his time at secondary school. Bullying has been on the rise in Finland for some time, with a survey just published this week showing a further increase in cases in the Helsinki area. While numbers of child psychologists and councillors in schools were increased following the Jokela School shooting last year, many schools still suffer a shortage in this area due to declining levels of public spending.

Earlier this year the government pledged over 800 million euros in tax cuts, despite forecasting that tax returns are already falling at an alarming rate. Such policies will only further exacerbate the problems being faced by Finns in obtaining basic services such as healthcare and education under conditions where the world economy stands on the brink of recession.

It is not clear what finally triggered Saari’s long-prepared killing spree. But when society is characterised by instability, insecurity, brutality and violence, whether the target is terrorism, the living standards of working people, or democratic rights—and when none of the major political parties offer a way out—individual outbursts of frustration can all too easily take a deranged, violent and self-destructive form.



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