

The Austin airplane suicide and the political crisis in the US

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The suicide of software engineer Andrew Joseph Stack, who last Thursday flew his small airplane into the seven-story building in Austin, Texas that houses the local offices of the Internal Revenue Service, was both shocking and tragic. Stack perished, as did an IRS employee, and numerous others were injured.

Stack's action has generated a volume of commentary in the media, as well as widespread popular reaction. The media response is predictably shallow and misleading. Defensively, the various pundits dismiss Stack as a "lunatic," a "terrorist," and "anti-government," and the lengthy statement he left behind as "hate-filled," and a mere "rant."

His action was deeply disoriented and misguided, and resulted in the death of an innocent government worker, 68-year-old Vernon Hunter, the father of six. It remains a fact, however, that Stack's anger and murderous frustration clearly speak to a much wider social reality.

The outrage against the government and against the rich that Stack expresses in his statement is shared by far more people than the political establishment cares to admit, probably even to itself. That is no doubt why media commentators in the aftermath of the incident hastened to insist that Stack was simply a criminal, and nothing more, and why the government quickly took down his Internet posting.

The destructiveness of his action does not alter the fact that Stack was a victim of a foul and reactionary political climate, enforced by every official institution of American society, that is indifferent and hostile to the needs and aspirations of the vast majority of the population and utterly subservient to the interests of a rapacious financial elite.

Stack's commentary is not a right-wing screed. He is not another Timothy McVeigh—the 1995 Oklahoma City bomber. The latter's misanthropic, racist and fascist conceptions were shaped during a period in which both political parties attempted, with some success—due above all to the complicity of the AFL-CIO unions—to pit sections of the middle class and workers against the very poor, the "welfare cheats," and so on, as the government carried out an assault on the social safety net.

What Stack's statement reveals is that he, a self-employed

engineer, identified himself—in however confused a fashion—with the working population and recognized a common enemy in the capitalist state and the giant corporations. His frustration over the absence of any avenue within official society to redress his grievances reflects the feelings of many others.

In his statement, while recognizing "blacks and poor immigrants" as fellow victims, Stack rages against big business and its political mouthpieces in Washington. He denounces, for example, the "handful of thugs and plunderers [who] can commit unthinkable atrocities (and in the case of the GM executives, for scores of years) and when it's time for their gravy train to crash under the weight of their gluttony and overwhelming stupidity, the force of the full federal government has no difficulty coming to their aid within days if not hours..."

He refers to the criminality of "the drug and insurance companies" and notes that "this country's leaders don't see this as important as bailing out a few of their vile, rich cronies."

Stack repeatedly refers to awakening from illusions about the nature of American democracy. He notes at one point, "this is where I learned that there are two 'interpretations' for every law; one for the very rich, and one for the rest of us." He comments that one of his painful encounters with the Internal Revenue Service (the US tax agency), "made me realize for the first time that I live in a country with an ideology that is based on a total and complete lie."

Stack refers to his time as a student, living in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in the 1970s, when his next-door neighbor was the elderly widow of a retired steelworker. "Her husband had worked all his life in the steel mills of central Pennsylvania with promises from big business and the union that, for his 30 years of service, he would have a pension and medical care to look forward to in his retirement. Instead he was one of the thousands who got nothing because the incompetent mill management and corrupt union (not to mention the government) raided their pension funds and stole their retirement. All she had was social security to live on." As he notes, the woman was surviving financially by eating cat food.

The engineer points to the recession in California in the early 1990s and "all of the young families who lost their homes" on

“street after street of boarded up houses abandoned to the wealthy loan companies who received government funds to ‘shore up’ their windfall.” And, further, to the dot-com bust and the 9/11 attacks, after which “the Government came to the aid of the airlines with billions of our tax dollars ... as usual they left me to rot and die while they bailed out their rich, incompetent cronies WITH MY MONEY!”

Stack darkly jests that the financial powers-that-be learned a lesson from the Crash of 1929, when “wealthy bankers and businessmen jump[ed] out of windows when they realized they screwed up and lost everything ... [T]hey now know how to fix that little economic problem; they just steal from the middle class (who doesn’t have any say in it, elections are a joke) to cover their asses and it’s ‘business-as-usual.’ Now when the wealthy f__k up, *the poor* get to die for the mistakes ...”

He concludes with a reference to the *Communist Manifesto*: “The communist creed: From each according to his ability, to each according to his need. The capitalist creed: From each according to his gullibility, to each according to his greed.”

Several issues stand out. Stack’s bitter reference to “presidential puppet GW Bush and his cronies” would lead one to conclude that Stack voted for or otherwise supported the candidacy of Barack Obama in 2008. Although he doesn’t say so, one would also assume that he, like many, many others, had illusions that an Obama administration would place restraints on what he calls “the wealthy sows at the government trough.”

In its own fashion, Stack’s tragically misguided action says something about a popular mood characterized by increasing disappointment and disillusionment with the new administration.

One might put it another way, making use of a historical analogy: Is it likely that an individual in his situation would make such comments and take such mad action in the face of a government seen to be carrying out measures genuinely in the interests of the broad mass of the population? Would such a confused, violent public protest, for example, have been likely to occur in early April 1934, 13 months after the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose New Deal policies, aimed at rescuing American capitalism, nonetheless held out some prospect of relief from the worst effects of the Great Depression?

In its own way, Stack’s statement and action make clear that wide layers of the US population now *take for granted* that, all the campaign promises and hype notwithstanding, nothing has changed for them under Obama. The government, he says, making no distinction between Republicans and Democrats, Bush and Obama, is “full of hypocrites from top to bottom, life is as cheap as their lies and their self-serving laws.”

Stack’s action also represents an indictment of the so-called labor movement in the US, and, at the same time, a serious warning. The embittered engineer quite correctly notes the complicity of the “corrupt” unions in the immiseration of the American population.

Individuals like Stack, with complete legitimacy, have no reason to look to the AFL-CIO officialdom and their local representatives, a venal crowd of well-heeled parasites, for any way out of the present crisis. The absence of a genuine labor movement conducting mass struggles against unemployment, wage-cutting and attacks on social programs was no doubt a factor in leading him to the futile belief that the only answer to his economic distress was an individual one.

The radicalization of that section of the population to which Stack belongs is not an insignificant development. It is a serious error, as Leon Trotsky pointed out in the 1930s in regard to the political situation in France, to imagine that the middle classes by their nature “do not like extremes.” The small businessman, he noted, “prefers order so long as business is going well and so long as he hopes that tomorrow it will go better. But when this hope is lost, he is easily enraged and is ready to give himself over to the most extreme measures.”

Trotsky noted that in periods of great crisis, “the despairing petty bourgeois” understands “that one cannot forgo the use of force.” He might have been speaking of Stack, who writes: “Sadly, though I spent my entire life trying to believe it wasn’t so, but violence not only is the answer, it is the only answer.”

Although anti-social and even homicidal attacks are relatively frequent in the US, they still represent a statistically insignificant response to the present situation. Masses of people will respond to their growing economic plight, not with individual acts of despair, but by drawing political conclusions and taking political action.

The continued subordination of the working population to the Democratic Party, with the complicity of the trade unions, is the most dangerous factor in contemporary American political life. It creates the risk that masses of “despairing petty bourgeois,” seeing no help coming from the “labor movement” and the official “left” in the Democratic Party, will be driven into the arms of extreme right-wing forces. Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum.

The Austin episode underscores the urgency of a political break by working people in the US from the Democrats and the establishment of an independent, international socialist movement that can win to its side all the suffering and exploited in the American population, in political unity with the working class around the world.



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