

Shooting rampage leaves nine dead at Connecticut beer distributor

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The community of Manchester, Connecticut, a working class town across the Connecticut River from Hartford, the state capital, is still in shock and mourning following a shooting rampage early Tuesday at a beer distributing company that left nine dead, including the gunman.

Tuesday's workplace shooting was the worst in Connecticut history, according to state police, and the most deadly in the US since 13 people were fatally shot by a military psychiatrist at a US Army base in Fort Hood, Texas in November 2009.

The events at Hartford Distributors, a distributor for Anheuser-Busch beers, bear the hallmarks of workplace violence that has become an unwelcome if not unexpected feature of American social life—a disgruntled employee, a bloody rampage, and surviving family members and fellow workers trying to make sense of a seemingly senseless course of events.

The gunman, delivery driver Omar Thornton, 34, arrived at the company facility just before 7:30 a.m. Tuesday for a disciplinary hearing with Teamsters union officials and management. According to witnesses, Thornton sat calmly as he watched surveillance video that purportedly showed him stealing “product”—i.e., beer—from a company truck.

He was given a choice of resigning or being fired, and chose to sign a resignation paper. Upon leaving the meeting, he asked if he could get a drink of water from the nearby kitchenette, where he retrieved two 9mm Ruger pistols he had stashed in his lunchbox.

Thornton then began to fire the weapons. Teamsters Local 1035 President Bryan Cirigliano reportedly tried to stop the gunman as he opened fire on Steven Hollander, the company's chief financial officer, and Louis Felder, 50, director of operations. Felder and Cirigliano, 51, were both killed instantly, while Hollander was shot several times but survived. All three had been at Thornton's disciplinary hearing, and their shootings seemed to be deliberate.

Thornton then went on a rampage throughout the building and on company grounds. There were as many as 70 employees at work at the time for the morning shift-change.

By the time police arrived several minutes later, responding to 911 calls from terrified employees, six more were dead and another two left seriously wounded. All of the victims were shot multiple times. Thornton seems to have particularly targeted those who tried to stop him.

In addition to the two individuals killed outside the disciplinary hearing, the dead included Francis Fazio Jr., 57; Doug Scruton, 56, an employee at the company for three decades; Edward Kennison, 49, a driver; William Ackerman, 51, a warehouse worker; Craig Pepin, 60, a driver just months from retirement; and Victor James, 60, also nearing retirement.

After the shooting ended, police found Omar Thornton in a corner office, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, with two pistols by his side. Police also found a shotgun and an extra clip of ammunition in his car.

Certain details shed light on what may have immediately driven Thornton to carry out the bloody rampage. The most obvious is the termination of his employment. Other factors include his overall financial situation. Family members also contend that Thornton, who was black, said he was the victim of racial discrimination and threats on the job.

None of these factors, however, taken separately or together, can provide a neat or simple explanation for a violent outburst that left co-workers dead and their families traumatized.

As always in such circumstances, certain psychological factors—none of which can be easily interpreted—intersect with the more evident ones. In Omar Thornton's case, however, family and friends described him as soft-spoken and laid-back, and said he had never shown a violent side.

Thornton had worked for two years at Hartford Distributors, first in the warehouse and then in the better-paid position as a driver. A little more than a decade earlier, in 1999, he was earning just \$24,000 a year making deliveries for Stericycle, a medical waste disposal company in Middletown, Connecticut.

According to court papers, in 2000 at the age of 24 he filed for bankruptcy, owing a dozen creditors, including American

Express and Sprint, a total of more than \$15,000. Court filings cited by the *New York Times* show he counted as his possessions at the time just \$250 worth of clothing and \$600 in a checking account.

Although records show the bankruptcy case was resolved by April 2001, Thornton continued to be hounded by creditors. He also owed \$2,500 in student loans, according to public records. On Tuesday, following the shooting rampage, one of his roommates reported that a creditor phoned their apartment seeking payment for a debt.

Although more details of Thornton's financial situation at the time of his death are not immediately available, it is clear that the loss of his job at Hartford Distributors would have exacerbated an already tenuous situation.

Christopher Roos, Teamsters Local 1035 business agent, told the *Hartford Courant* that Thornton had complained about working in the warehouse, but Roos had told him he was the "low man" in seniority and would have to wait. "A position came open about a year ago," Roos said, and Thornton got the driver's job.

The events leading up to the meeting where he was forced to resign also shed light on the type of practices used by management in the modern US workplace. While it is unclear what tipped off management to Thornton's alleged stealing of beer, the company had reportedly been trailing him for several weeks to collect evidence. Union officials present at his hearing reported that Thornton himself remarked on the high quality of the surveillance video.

According to the *New York Times*, Felder, director of operations at Hartford Distributors and one of Thornton's victims, "developed his own warehouse management software that helped beer distributors track sales and losses to pilferage or breakage."

While company and union officials maintain that they were unaware of any racial discrimination against Thornton and that he never brought it to their attention, statements of his friends and family contradict this.

Kristi Hannah, Omar Thornton's longtime girlfriend, says that during his employment at the distributor he was the target of sustained racial harassment. She said he had shown her cell phone pictures of racial slurs written in the bathroom.

Hannah told "Good Morning America," "He said every day when he'd come in, there'd be new stuff on the [bathroom] wall." She said, "One was a hangman with a noose around his neck and underneath it said, 'Kill the n-word.'"

"I know what I seen on that wall and that picture and that would make somebody go crazy," she added. "If they keep doing it to somebody over and over and over and over and over. And I know that was happening to him because no one

just wakes up one day and does that."

Whatever it was in the end that pushed Omar Thornton over the edge, his actions take place in an unhealthy environment where despair has gripped a portion of society as it confronts poverty, joblessness and growing social inequality. Many people are losing hope that their lives will improve, as recessionary, and in certain areas, Depression-like conditions, take hold.

Americans have been told that their personal and financial crises are individual problems, of no concern to society as a whole. And every leading institution, including the trade unions, lives up to that outlook and refuses to lend a helping hand. In these circumstances, such tragic outbursts are inevitable in workplaces, schools and other public places.

According to figures compiled by *Newsweek*, mass shootings account for less than one percent of the 15,000 average annual homicides in the US. However, under conditions of deepening social and economic crisis, and job losses in particular, these figures are likely to increase.

Jack Levine, a professor of sociology and criminology at Northeastern University in Boston, told *Newsweek*, "Almost all of these vengeful killers have suffered some catastrophic loss. It's always the loss of the job or a loss of a lot of money in the stock market."

Associated Press has compiled a partial list of fatal workplace shootings in the US from 1986 to the present. Even this partial list, which undoubtedly does not include some incidents when one or two people lost their lives, adds up to 189 people.

Although the number of workplace killings is low when compared to the overall murder rate, a survey by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics provides the following disturbing figures. During a recent 12-month period: 9 percent of companies with 11-49 employees have had at least one incident of workplace violence (some not fatal); for companies with 50-249 employees, that number increased to 16 percent; and 27 percent of companies with 250-999 employees reported at least one incidence of workplace violence.



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