After the shooting in Tucson

David North
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Who is responsible for Saturday's violence in Tucson, which left six people dead and 14 others wounded, including a congresswoman now fighting for her life?

It is indubitably true that there is a direct and immediate connection between the murderous rampage of the shooter, Jared L. Loughner, and the interminable stream of fascistic ravings from Republican Party politicians, corporate-funded "Tea Party" organizations, and television and talk-radio demagogues. The *Washington Post*'s admonition that "it seems an unsupported leap to blame either the political climate or any particular individual group for inciting the gunman" flies in the face of well-known facts about the political dynamics, social constituency and psychology of the extreme right in the United States. The *Post*'s claim that Mr. Loughner is simply "a disturbed young man with no coherent political philosophy" is utterly disingenuous. The American right has long understood the susceptibility of people suffering from serious forms of psychotic derangement to its message of hate, paranoia-tinged bigotry and anticommunism.

However, it would be inadequate to explain Loughner's actions as merely the product of the propaganda of the political right and its stable of talk show demagogues. There are deeper social causes for the bloody events in Tucson.

The Democratic Party and the liberal left, in a perpetual state of political demoralization, console themselves with the thought that America would be a far happier place if only a more civilized and polite form of discourse could be encouraged. The task before reasonable people, they argue, in accordance with the gospel of Jon Stewart, is to persuade everyone, on the "left" as well as the right, to "tone down" the rhetoric, to argue less and listen more, and to find a common ground.

This sickly spirit of universal conciliation has found a distinctly reactionary expression in the aftermath of the attempted assassination of Congresswoman Giffords. Richard Kim of the *Nation* proposes, as an antidote to the violence of the right, that the American people "cherish more dearly the practice of politics and citizenship as something noble in its intent, something to expand and celebrate—instead of something to denigrate as the enemy of the people."

These words are a devastating self-exposure of the political bankruptcy of what passes for the "left" in the United States, and show why it is possible for the extreme right (despite being funded to the hilt by corporate money) to exploit popular grievances and monopolize the rhetoric of social discontent.

The United States is entering the fourth year of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The official unemployment rate has been in the area of 10 percent (a figure which does not count those who have given up looking for a job), the collapse in housing prices has slashed the net worth of tens of millions of American families, and several million families have lost their homes due to foreclosures. Social inequality is at a level not seen since the 1920s. During the past 40 years, the income of American workers has stagnated. Virtually all of the growth in income since the 1970s has gone into the pockets of the richest one percent of the population.

After the eruption of the financial crisis in September 2008, the administrations of Bush and Obama devoted all their energies to protecting the wealth and interests of the financial and corporate elite, whose reckless speculations led directly to the disaster. Under Obama, the grip of the financial interests over the state has grown even tighter. Not only has no one in the finance industry been held accountable for the disaster, the political power and wealth of the economic parasites have risen to new heights. Indeed, under Obama, the

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White House has come to serve as something of a combined branch office of Goldman Sachs and JPMorgan Chase.

Millions of American workers feel instinctively and correctly that the politicians of both the Republican and Democratic parties are for sale, and that all the important decisions made by the government are for the rich. And yet it is this political system that the *Nation* wants the people to "cherish," "expand" and "celebrate." How can such a message appeal to masses of people in the midst of a terrible social crisis? Can it come as a surprise that the tributes of the *Nation* and like-minded "progressive" publications to the glories of American politics in general and the Obama administration in particular fall on deaf ears?

The frustration and anger of an ever-growing portion of the people increase month by month. They look and listen for a way out of the deepening crisis. But who is telling them what to do, who to fight, and, the most important question of all, how to fight? There is an immortal moment in director John Ford's cinematic rendition of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* when a dirt-poor farmer, facing dispossession from the land he worked his entire life, asks in desperation, "Who should I shoot?" Unable to get a straight answer, he sinks to the ground in despair.

Millions of people today are in a similar situation. They are threatened with disaster. No, they do not want to shoot or kill anyone. But they do want change, and they are prepared to fight for it. But the entire social structure, and the political system erected upon it, seems to allow no possibility for protest and progressive change. An overwhelming majority of American working people has never had the opportunity to participate in a single act of organized social protest.

Before 1980, strikes and other forms of mass protest—including massive demonstrations and even urban uprisings—were part of the fabric of American life. Class struggle was, in one form or another, the engine of social progress. It should be pointed out that in the early 1980s, Arizona was a major center of the strike of copper miners against Phelps Dodge. One of the important focal points of that strike was a large mine in the town of Ajo, not far from Tucson. That strike, like every other of the 1980s, was betrayed.

For nearly 30 years, the official trade unions and civil rights organizations—which arose out of great social struggles between 1930 and 1965—have devoted themselves to blocking and suppressing every expression of popular discontent. Strikes and virtually every other form of social protest have disappeared. During the same period, administrations, Democratic as well as Republican, have slashed taxes for the rich and helped them accumulate their massive personal fortunes.

But discontent builds relentlessly and seeks an outlet. To the extent that it cannot find a progressive and optimistic expression, in the form of collectively organized class struggle, it finds malignant expression in the outbursts of desperate individuals. Sections of society, and not only those who are psychologically disturbed, become susceptible to the demagogues of the extreme right, for whom corporate funding and publicity are always available.

The events in Tucson are a warning. The accumulating social discontent must find a new and progressive path of expression. That path can be opened only through the fight for socialism and the building of a new revolutionary movement of the working class.

It is to develop this fight that the Socialist Equality Party is sponsoring a public conference in Ann Arbor on April 9-10, 2011. Public conferences will also be held in Los Angeles on April 16 and in New York on April 30. We urge all those who wish to join this struggle to make their plans to attend these important events.

(For information on the conferences, click here).

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