

New York police kill gunman, wound nine bystanders in midtown Manhattan

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Last Friday morning, around the corner from the Empire State Building in midtown Manhattan, an employee who had been laid off from a nearby firm shot and killed a former coworker with whom he had bitterly clashed in the past. The suspect was almost immediately confronted by the police, who shot and killed him, in the process wounding nine bystanders.

The incident took place at about 9 a.m., when the sidewalks were crowded with both workers and tourists. Jeffrey Johnson (58) fatally shot Steven Ercolino and then walked up Fifth Avenue, apparently trying to blend in with the morning crowds. Two patrolmen who were stationed at the Empire State skyscraper and who had been alerted to the shooting confronted Johnson. Later reporting that he pointed the gun at them, they fired off 16 rounds, 9 of which apparently hit passersby. Although none of the injuries were life-threatening, some were serious enough to leave the victims still hospitalized two days later.

Both Johnson and Ercolino had worked for Hazan Imports, which sells belts and handbags, until Johnson was let go about two years ago. Although Johnson was not fired and he appeared to accept the layoff without complaint, the relationship between the two men was apparently so poisoned that Johnson returned to the workplace on April 27, 2011, months after he was laid off, and a violent incident in the elevator led to both men filing police complaints.

Friday's confrontation, in one of the busiest business and tourist areas in the world, came less than two weeks after a similar incident in Times Square, an even busier tourist destination less than a mile away. On August 11, the police fired 12 shots at an apparently deranged man who was holding a knife. (See "Slaughter on Seventh Avenue"). The man was followed for seven blocks, surrounded by scores of

heavily armed officers, and shot dead.

The New York City police, led by Commissioner Ray Kelly, immediately joined with Mayor Michael Bloomberg to justify the latest shooting, finding no fault with the firing of 16 rounds and the wounding of innocent bystanders. Initially the police claimed that Johnson had fired at the pursuing officers, but they later admitted that was not the case. It was also suggested that some of the injured were hit by bullets fired by Johnson, but the authorities soon acknowledged that was also not true.

Kelly said that the police officers "had absolutely no choice" but to fire when they did and as they did. Some or all of those hit by police bullets may sue the city. Although the courts have usually backed up the authorities in such cases, the city has sometimes reached settlements, as in a 2009 police shooting that left a bystander paralyzed and a 2005 shooting outside Sylvia's restaurant in Harlem, another New York landmark.

When radio bulletins were first broadcast on the morning of the Empire State incident, they made it appear as though yet another mass shooting, like the recent killings in Colorado and Wisconsin, was under way. It soon became apparent that this was not the case, or, rather, that the mass shooting was being carried out by the police.

The individual incidents in New York over the past two weeks may have been triggered by mental illness or, in the latest case, a psychological disturbance that did not necessarily meet the usual standard of insanity. In any case, the two victims of police bullets are not around to be questioned on their psychological state or motives.

Whatever the specific motives, however, these two events reflect the climate of intense and growing social

tension in New York as well as in other cities in the US. The behavior of the police is criminally reckless to the point of derangement. It is their response to a climate of permanent mass unemployment, rising poverty, attacks on civil liberties, and the fostering of nationalism, xenophobia, anti-immigrant racism and every other form of fear-mongering and backwardness.

In New York, the so-called “war on terror” has been used to justify mass surveillance of the area’s Muslim population, including US citizens. The repression of the Occupy Wall Street protests last year and the stop-and-frisk operations that have been going on for years are just two of the more prominent outrages that have taken place with only the meekest complaints in the media and from the city’s erstwhile liberal politicians.

While the social tensions, the record levels of inequality and the climate of unending war find their reflection in such tragedies as the shootings in Colorado and Wisconsin, the ruling class fears and is preparing for far different circumstances—the return of mass political struggles by the working class. The political elite and its police seize on incidents such as the shootings in New York City in the past two weeks to accustom the population to official violence and the infrastructure of a police state. The nine bystander victims of the Empire State shooting are to be regarded as “collateral damage” in the defense of a system that is increasingly hated by the masses of the population.



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