Minneapolis workplace shooting leaves six dead

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A workplace shooting last Thursday afternoon in the Bryn Mawr neighborhood of Minneapolis, Minnesota claimed six lives, including that of the shooter. The tragedy focused renewed attention on an all too common phenomenon in the US, in which individuals lash out violently at their places of employment, killing or wounding their coworkers or management personnel.

At about 4:25 p.m., Andrew Engeldinger, 36, parked his car outside Accent Signage Systems, Inc., walked into the loading dock area and immediately began shooting people. Engeldinger had been fired by the company earlier that day. According to Minneapolis Police Chief Tim Dolan, it appeared that the shooter consciously chose the people he shot with a Glock 9 mm semi-automatic handgun. Witnesses said he apparently walked by some people in the building, seeking out his victims.

Killed in the shooting were Reuven Rahamim, 61, owner of Accent; three company employees: Rami Cooks, 62, Ronald Edberg, 58, Jacob Beneke, 34; and a UPS driver on the premises, Keith Basinski, 50. Police found Engeldinger dead in the basement of the building near one shell casing. Four other people were wounded, with two men, both company executives, still in the hospital as of Sunday.

In a statement released Friday, Engeldinger's family said, "Our hearts go out to the families of the people killed and those who were wounded in this tragedy. Nothing we can say can make up for their loss." His parents added, "Our son struggled for years with mental illness. In the last few years, he no longer had contact with us. This is not an excuse for his actions, but sadly, may be a partial explanation."

Andrew Engeldinger's uncle said something changed in his nephew a few years ago, but he could not put his finger on it. In comments quoted on Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), Joe Engeldinger said, "I've known him all his life. He was just a good kid. It just doesn't make any sense to me. It must have been some underlying thing that caused him to snap." He had been unaware of his struggles with mental illness.

As is so often the case, the gunman's neighbors sensed nothing particularly out of the ordinary or strange about him, although he pretty much kept to himself. "There was just nothing to say--'wow, we need to watch out for this person,'" neighbor Brian Jorgensen told MPR. He kept his lawn mowed and his sidewalk shoveled. He had no police record outside of a few traffic violations from 1997.

Engeldinger had bought a small bungalow in south Minneapolis about a decade ago, and had been excited about it, according to his uncle. Police searching this house on Friday found packages for 10,000 rounds of ammunition and another firearm. Police say he apparently purchased the guns about a year ago, and it was unclear whether they had been purchased legally.

The shooting at Accent Signage Systems is the deadliest incident of workplace violence in Minnesota since the state began tracking such attacks in 1992. According to the Minnesota Bureau of Labor and Industry, workplace violence has claimed 95 lives over the past 20 years, with 68 of these deaths the result of shootings.

Similar statistics are mirrored nationwide. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in 2008, the latest year for which full data is available, there were 526 workplace homicides, accounting for 10 percent of all workplace fatalities. Included among these were 30 multiple-fatality workplace killings, including 67 homicides and seven suicides.

A little more than a month ago, on August 24, an

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employee who had been laid off from a business near the Empire State Building in midtown Manhattan shot and killed a former coworker he had clashed with in the past. In this case, New York City police officers shot and killed the gunman, in the process wounding nine bystanders.

In one of the most violent workplace shooting incidents in recent years, on August 3, 2010, Omar Thornton, 34, carried out a shooting rampage at a beer distributor in Manchester, Connecticut, leaving nine people dead, including the gunman. The bloody incident followed a disciplinary hearing in which Thornton was given the choice of resigning or being fired.

Nearly 8 percent of working adults in the US were threatened, bullied or harassed on the job in 2010, according to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. An average of two murders take place each day in the American workplace from worker-on-worker violence, according to the BLS. And over the past 15 years, deaths resulting from workplace violence continue to rank among the top four causes of occupational violence.

While authorities and the media generally portray such violent outbursts as senseless and explicable, it is impossible to discount the connection between the persistence of the economic crisis—the growth of long-term unemployment and the increased drive for productivity—and the growth of workplace violence. While the individual shooters may erupt pathologically, this madness is ultimately bound up with deep-seated social tensions.

Dr. Larry Barton, president of Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania-based American College and an expert in workplace violence, also runs a consultancy firm counseling 40 Fortune 500 companies. He told jobs.aol.com that threats of violence among his clients are up 28 percent this year alone.

“Many of us who thought the [economic downturn] was going to be a short-term hiccup, and so that gave us temporary comfort,” Barton said. “But is has become an ulcer, and with a lot more anxiety about cutbacks, people wondering, ‘Am I next? Who would think people would lie low and do their work. But that’s not the case, it seems people become more provocative.”

With the entrenchment of the recessionary environment, the loss of a job--and the possibility of long-term unemployment under conditions of cuts to jobless benefits--poses a personal disaster for a worker and his or her family in the form of foreclosure, the loss of health car, hunger and poverty, and more. Such conditions, and the utter indifference of official society to the state of the population, inevitably have an impact on the most psychologically vulnerable and alienated, setting the stage for more anti-social violence and tragedy.

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