

Obama on gun control: Expand surveillance and police powers

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Flanked by schoolchildren to evoke the December 14 Newtown, Connecticut school shooting, President Barack Obama announced a raft of gun control proposals Wednesday. In addition to legislative proposals for Congress, Obama signed 23 executive orders during a news conference at the White House.

The plan, drawn up by a task force headed by Vice President Joseph Biden, includes the expansion of FBI databases to include background checks on all individuals seeking to purchase a gun and a ban on military-style assault weapons.

Since the tragic mass shooting by 20-year old Adam Lanza, including the killing of 20 children, nothing has been said in the political establishment and mass media about the underlying causes of such actions: social dislocation, inequality and, above all, the militarization of American society. On the contrary, the new gun control measures are primarily aimed at expanding the powers of the state over an increasingly polarized and unstable society.

“This is our first task as a society: Keeping our children safe,” the president declared Wednesday. “This is how we will be judged. And their voices should compel us to change.” Obama pledged to “put more cops back on the job and back on our streets”, “severely punish” gun buyers who attempt to avoid background checks, and provide financial incentives to place police “resource officers” in schools—a proposal similar to the National Rifle Association’s demand that armed guards be placed in schools.

The executive actions, according to the White House web site, include requiring federal agencies to “make relevant data available to the federal background check system.” What or how much data is “relevant” has not been detailed, although mental health backgrounds will be one component.

Currently, all licensed firearms dealers are required to run background checks through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System. The expanded federal database would include sales at gun shows and private sales, which account for 40 percent of total purchases.

Another order is aimed at dismantling the “unnecessary legal barriers... that may prevent states from making information available to the background check system,” while a third will “improve incentives for states to share information with the background check system.” Other provisions will allow for greater federal tracking of guns.

Obama called on Congress to support a ban on assault weapons and magazines holding more than 10 rounds. This issue, while presented as the most contentious by the media and right-wing groups, is the one the administration has signaled it is most willing to dispense with as part of a legislative deal. Republicans have warned that the proposal will face strong opposition in the House, with the most fascistic elements of the right wing leading the charge. “I will seek to thwart this action by any means necessary, including but not limited to eliminating funding for implementation, defunding the White House, and even filing articles of impeachment,” Rep. Steve Stockman, a first-term Texas Republican, declared Monday. Many Democrats are also likely to oppose the assault weapons ban.

Rahm Emanuel, mayor of Chicago and Obama’s former chief of staff, told the *New York Times* that the president should “clear the table” by doing whatever he can administratively so small issues do not get in the way of the bigger legislative fights over access to guns.”

“Don’t allow a side issue to derail these things,”

Emanuel said of the assault weapons proposal. A spate of violence in Chicago has been used by the mayor, as with mayors in other cities such as Detroit, to argue for much more aggressive and anti-democratic policing. It is a policy that has been pursued aggressively by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a leading advocate of gun control measures.

The *Times* added that while many gun control advocates were focusing on banning the types of weapons used in the Newtown and Aurora, Colorado killings, “there is an emerging consensus on Capitol Hill and among gun education groups that improving the system of background check legislation... is the most viable legislative route to pursue.” A spokesman for Third Way, a pro-Democratic Party group involved in policy discussions, explained, “The assault weapons ban is a low priority relative to the other measures the Biden task force is considering.” Many of the firearms used in recent shootings were purchased legally. Adam Lanza, the gunman responsible for the Newtown massacre, used an assault weapon purchased by his mother. Likewise absent from the discussion on gun violence is the endless stream of fatal shootings carried out by police. (See: “Killings highlight epidemic of police violence in the US”).

A New York state bill containing similar provisions to the White House proposal was rushed through Monday night and signed by Governor Andrew Cuomo Tuesday. The existing assault weapons ban was expanded to include any semiautomatic weapon with a detachable magazine, including handguns, and magazines holding more than seven bullets.

The law also requires mental health professionals and social workers to report when they believe their clients are likely to cause harm to themselves or others. This provision opens the way for police to confiscate any guns owned by “dangerous” patients.

Mental health experts have expressed concern over the law. Dr. Paul Appelbaum, director of the Division of Law, Ethics, and Psychiatry at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, told the *New York Times* on Monday that the requirement “represents a major change in the presumption of confidentiality that has been inherent in mental health treatment... The prospect of being reported to the local authorities even if they do not have weapons, may be enough to discourage patients with suicidal or

homicidal thoughts from seeking treatment or from being honest about their impulses.”

In his remarks Wednesday, Obama proposed \$10 million in Centers for Disease Control funding for “research into the effects that violent video games have on young minds.” “We don’t benefit from ignorance,” he said. “We don’t benefit from not knowing the science of this epidemic of violence.”

The greatest promoter and purveyor of violence in the United States, however, is the American government, which is engaged in endless war abroad. Special operations teams are glorified by the media, and the president boasts of routinely ordering the assassination of individuals, including US citizens, all over the world. American drone attacks have killed thousands of civilians across the Middle East, including hundreds of children.

The “gun rights” campaign of the right wing is a reactionary effort to whip up the most confused and backward layers of the population. The ruling class uses the “gun control debate” as a diversion from more critical issues confronting the working class, while strengthening its monopoly over violence and firepower.

The ruling class responds to every social disaster by stepping up policing and attacking democratic rights. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in the wake of the Newtown massacre, the roots of such tragedies are not incomprehensible. “The roots are not hard to trace: a society of unprecedented inequality, a thoroughly backward official political ideology without an ounce of progressive content, and, above all, an incredible level of violence perpetrated by the state, accompanied by the brutalization of society as a whole.”



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