

Obama on gun control: An exercise in concealing harsh social truths

David Walsh
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President Barack Obama spoke Monday in West Hartford, Connecticut on gun violence, calling on the American people to pressure Congress to pass new federal weapons controls.

Hartford, the state capital, is some 50 miles northeast of Newtown, Connecticut, the scene last December 14 of the horrific slaughter of 20 children and six staff members at the Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Obama was introduced by the mother of one of the slain children, who spoke with great emotion. A number of other parents of Sandy Hook victims were present at the University of Hartford gymnasium rally and later accompanied Obama back to Washington to lobby Congress for the new gun control measures.

Any serious assessment of Monday's event has to begin by distinguishing the Newtown parents—driven by the desire that no more families should have to experience their grief—from the Obama administration and its cynical, politically motivated operations. They exist in different moral universes.

At the end of the day, the administration and significant sections of the ruling elite view gun control as a means of expanding police powers and the ability of the authorities to keep tabs on the population. Whether the White House will be able to push its present proposals through Congress in the face of stiff ultra-right opposition or not, the general reactionary thrust of government policy is clear. Its “gun control” proposals have—and can have—nothing to do with preventing a repeat of the Sandy Hook killings.

In the first place, is there any convincing evidence that the measures currently promoted by the White House would have prevented or even reduced the tragic dimensions of any of the mass shootings that have occurred in the US in recent decades?

The ban on assault weapons and magazines that hold more than ten rounds may be opposed primarily by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and fascistic elements in the Republican Party, but to present that, along with more background checks, as a solution to outbursts of anti-social

violence is an attempt to delude the public and divert its attention from the deep sickness of American society.

In his comments Monday, Obama adopted the same general approach as that taken by his predecessors Bill Clinton and George W. Bush when confronted by earlier mass shootings, and which can be found in his own previous remarks on Sandy Hook and the July 2012 shooting in an Aurora, Colorado movie theater.

The president emphasized the devastating character of the Newtown massacre and referred to “the horror of mass killings” in general, along with “the street crime that’s too common in too many neighborhoods,” without making a single reference to the social source of episodes evidently frequent enough to warrant new federal legislation.

One searches the president’s 3,200 words in vain for the hint of an explanation of the “mass killings” in America, which have resulted in hundreds of deaths and devastation for thousands of families. Obama’s remark that December 14, 2012 was “the toughest day of my presidency” cannot be innocently squared with his total lack of interest in making sense of the Sandy Hook tragedy.

As we commented in December 2012, “The American ruling class has lost the capacity for self-examination. It knows that any serious analysis of the roots of this and other tragedies points back to itself and the society it dominates.”

Why and how a given individual suffers a psychic-homicidal breakdown is an immensely complex process, dependent upon a host of particular factors. If such an event occurred once a half-century, or even one time in a decade, it could perhaps be attributed to largely private and personal reasons, to individual biochemistry gone wrong. It might be, from the statistical point of view, an aberration.

However, America has been beset, from one coast to the other, by dozens and dozens of murderous attacks over the past two decades or more—on school children, high school and university students, restaurant and movie patrons, fellow employees in factories and offices...

In his comments Monday, Obama downplayed the social and political tensions in America. “I know sometimes,” the

president asserted, “when you watch cable news or talk radio, or you browse the Internet, you’d think, man, everybody just hates each other, everybody is just at each other’s throats. But that’s not how most Americans think about these issues. There are good people on both sides of every issue.”

This is a red herring. The essential division in America is not between those who advocate gun control and those opposing it, or between Democrat and Republican, but between the ruling political and economic elite, on the one hand, who control every important aspect of life, and the working population, on the other, who make up the overwhelming and disenfranchised majority of the American people. That divide has widened to unprecedented and nearly unbearable proportions.

The population at present is under an all-sided attack on its jobs, retirement benefits, working and living conditions, medical care, educational opportunities and democratic rights. A wealthy handful view broad layers of the people as nothing more than easy pickings for financial plunder or cannon fodder for its neo-colonial wars.

The economic and psychological security of tens of millions has been dealt devastating blows. Vast numbers of Americans see little between them and the social abyss.

US authorities are pursuing relentless militarism and violence in every part of the globe. The president and his military-intelligence apparatus have arrogated to themselves the right to make war on any country or individual who steps out of line, or merely threatens to. The problem of CIA “black sites” and illegal detention has been reduced through recourse to a policy of murdering political opponents.

The American government’s official policy—and, for that matter, the policy of every state and local police department in the US—of resolving every dispute through overwhelming and lethal force, eagerly encouraged by the media, hangs over life in the US like a filthy cloud and must distort the consciousness of the weakest, most susceptible individuals.

The following comment by Obama on Monday should be considered in light of the US government’s murder of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen never charged with a crime, and his 16-year-old son, along with thousands of civilians killed in drone attacks: “If there is even one step we can take to keep somebody from murdering dozens of innocents in the span of minutes, shouldn’t we be taking that step? If there is just one thing we can do to keep one father from having to bury his child, isn’t that worth fighting for?” In the words of Chaplin’s Monsieur Verdoux, the worst mass shooter in America is “an amateur by comparison” with Obama and his cohorts.

While a significant portion of the population feel mistrust or hatred of Washington and Wall Street, alienation from the

major political parties and unions and a general disgust for the existing state of things, they do not yet see—and, for the most part, cannot yet even envision—a mass movement in opposition to the profit system that would offer some way out of the present disastrous situation.

The specific conjuncture helps create an intensely unstable, unsettling and volatile popular mood.

Obama reached what might have been the height of cynicism in his remarks Monday when he referred to surveys indicating that “90 percent of Americans” are in favor of “universal background checks.”

This is the same administration that declares that wide opposition to the ongoing war in Afghanistan, for example, will not deter it from pursuing the occupation, that it will not “govern by opinion polls.” Every survey currently reveals vast opposition to any cutting of Social Security, 90 percent in some polls, and yet both parties in Washington ruthlessly push ahead.

Obama acted the demagogue in Hartford. Concluding his remarks, the president told his audience: “If you believe in the right to bear arms, like I do, but think we should prevent an irresponsible few from inflicting harm—stand up. Stand up... If we come together and raise our voices together and demand this change together, I’m convinced cooperation and common sense will prevail. We will find sensible, intelligent ways to make this country stronger and safer for our children.”

In fact, the corporate-financial stranglehold over life in the US, enforced by the two-party system as a whole and the Obama administration in particular, is the ultimate source of every burning social ill, including anti-social mayhem. Capitalism represents the gravest danger to the conditions and very lives of the American people. The sooner conscious opposition to the system assumes a mass character, the sooner the social, political and cultural climate will change for the better.



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