

Obama announces executive measures for gun control

Tom Eley
6 January 2016

At a White House event held Tuesday, President Barack Obama announced a series of executive actions whose aim, in the name of reducing gun violence in the US, is to further strengthen police powers and the surveillance of the population.

Speaking in the East Room and surrounded by gun control activists and survivors of gun violence, Obama briefly outlined a handful of policies that will, even by his own account, do little to slow the proliferation of gun-related deaths in the US, which numbered over 30,000 last year alone.

“We know we can’t stop every act of violence, every act of evil in the world,” Obama said. “But maybe we could try to stop one act of evil, one act of violence.”

A fact sheet distributed to the media vaguely describes “a series of commonsense executive actions” whose stated goal is to “reduce gun violence.” Chief among these will be measures to strengthen the powers of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The ATF will hire 200 new agents and impose rules on gun sellers requiring that they be licensed and submit for a background check the identities of those attempting to purchase guns. This data will include “complete criminal history records and criminal dispositions, information on persons disqualified because of a mental illness, and qualifying crimes of domestic violence.” The ATF has created an Internet Investigation Center to investigate illegal firearm sales, and \$4 million will be allocated for new hiring at the National Integrated Ballistics Information Network.

The FBI will make “improvements” to its system of processing background checks, including making it effective “24 hours a day, 7 days a week” and hiring more than 230 new analysts, while instituting new

forms of shared policing with “local authorities.”

The aim of these executive actions will be to close the so-called “gun show loophole” by which gun sellers can avoid federal regulations, including background checks.

Both the Social Security Administration and the Department of Health and Human Services will alter privacy rules—what the White House calls “unnecessary legal barriers”—that currently prevent government entities involved in health care from sharing information on Americans who suffer from mental health problems. Obama’s measures will also remove legal restrictions on doctors and other health care professionals from sharing such information with federal police agencies—a clear violation of medical ethics. The names of the individuals involved will evidently be fed into ATF and FBI databases.

Experts have expressed concerns that the new data gathering will stigmatize those who suffer from mental health problems. Ron Honberg, national director of policy and legal affairs for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), warned that the “criteria should be based on what science tells us [who the people are] who pose enhanced risk for violence.” He added, “The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent.”

Dr. Liza Gold, a psychiatrist at Georgetown University Medical Center, warned that 75,000 people who cannot manage their own Social Security benefits due to disability could face discrimination under the background checks “in a way that stigmatizes a large swath of people simply because they have mental illness and qualify for benefits... There is no evidence that this is a category of people who are at risk of committing gun violence.”

Obama said he will propose \$500 million to expand

access to mental health treatment. But this will do little to stem what the NAMI calls a “national crisis.” Over \$4 billion in mental health funding was slashed from state budgets just in the years 2009-2011. The National Institute for Mental Health has estimated that two-thirds of children who suffer from lifetime mental illnesses do not receive treatment.

Obama also proposed the implementation of gun safety technologies to prevent accidental gun discharges, which claim the lives of hundreds of Americans each year.

Conspicuous in its absence from Obama’s remarks was any mention of police gun violence. Cops have killed at least 1,200 Americans this year, the vast majority of these in shootings, according to a list compiled by killedbypolice.net. In eight years in office, Obama has refused to bring federal charges against a single killer cop and his administration has promoted the militarization of the police with weapons and operations procedures designed for war.

Obama’s executive measures are an effort to side-step Congress, where Republicans, joined by a minority of Democrats, have repeatedly blocked all efforts to regulate the gun trade.

Republican opposition to gun control is rooted in the party’s “base,” which includes disoriented and fascist-minded sections of the US population. House Speaker Paul Ryan responded to the White House proposals in typically hysterical fashion. He accused Obama of “intimidation” and accused him of disregarding “criminals and terrorists” while “go[ing] after the most law-abiding of citizens.”

The White House ceremony was introduced by Mark Barden, whose seven-year-old son was among the 26 killed in the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Newtown, Connecticut. Emphasizing the obvious link between guns and mass killings, Obama offered a partial list of the homicidal eruptions that have taken place in the US in recent years: “Fort Hood, Binghamton, Aurora, Oak Creek, Newtown, the Navy Yard, Santa Barbara, Charleston, San Bernardino.”

“We are not inherently more prone to violence,” Obama said of the American population. “[But] we are the only advanced country on Earth that sees this kind of mass violence erupt with this kind of frequency. It doesn’t happen in other advanced countries. It’s not even close.”

Yet Obama did not, and could not, address the features of American society that make it so violent: extreme and mounting social inequality, which spawns despair, alienation and hopelessness; and unrelenting military violence.

Obama is himself deeply implicated in both. His administration has overseen the largest-ever transfer of wealth from the working class—the great majority of the population—to America’s financial aristocracy. Obama’s major domestic initiatives—Race to the Top and the Affordable Care Act—have converted both education and health care into openly class-based systems. At the same time, formerly decent-paying categories of labor have been turned into low-paying, casual work following Obama’s “rescue” of the auto industry, which was predicated on universalizing near-poverty-level wages for new-hires.

As for “gun violence,” the Obama administration is the world’s biggest purveyor. Obama, who appeared to weep in the portion of his remarks in which he referred to Sandy Hook, has shed not a tear for the countless thousands of children who have been killed and maimed under his watch by the US and its proxies and allies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.

Obama himself personally selects victims for extrajudicial assassinations all over the world, who are placed on a White House “kill list.” The American president represents a ruling class that celebrates and revels in military violence, which Lincoln once condemned as “that glorious rainbow that rises in showers of blood.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact