

Worst-ever US mass shooting

Gunman massacres 50 in Orlando nightclub

Bill Van Auken
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In a monstrous and reactionary act, a heavily armed lone gunman killed 50 people and wounded 53 more early Sunday morning at an LGBT nightclub, the Pulse, in Orlando, Florida. Many of the injured suffered grievous gunshot wounds inflicted by a military-style A-15 assault rifle, raising the strong possibility that the death toll will rise.

Within hours of the incident, the reaction of the media and leading US political figures, including the presumptive Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, made it clear that the mass killings will be fully exploited to promote war abroad and intensified state repression at home.

The gunman, identified as Omar Mateen, 29, a Florida resident, US citizen and son of immigrants from Afghanistan, was himself killed in a firefight with an Orlando police SWAT unit.

At the time of the shooting, the nightclub, which describes itself as “Orlando’s Premier Gay Nightclub,” was packed with over 350 people who had turned out for a Latin music night. The initial list of victims released by police indicated that many of the victims were Hispanic.

According to reports Sunday, Mateen made a 911 call at the time of the attack declaring his allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and mentioning the Boston Marathon bombers. Just hours after the attack, ISIS itself claimed responsibility, declaring that the massacre “was carried out by an Islamic State fighter.” Whatever the truth of this boast, ISIS’ celebration of the cold-blooded murder of 50 innocent people only underscored the thoroughly right-wing character of this organization.

The FBI acknowledged that its agents had interviewed Mateen three times, twice in 2013 in connection with alleged “inflammatory statements” he

made to coworkers, and in 2014 in relation to possible ties to Moner Mohammad Abusalha, who grew up in Florida and went to fight for an Islamist militia in the US-backed war for regime-change in Syria, where he detonated a suicide bomb. The FBI said that both investigations concluded that Mateen did not pose a threat and were ended.

US officials expressed skepticism that there existed any substantive links between Mateen and ISIS. The precise character of the killer’s motives remains unclear.

Mateen’s father told the media that his son had voiced strong anti-gay sentiments and had expressed anger at seeing two men kissing in Miami earlier this year. The father, Seddique Mir Mateen, said the family was “in shock, like the whole country,” adding that his son’s actions had “nothing to do with religion.”

Mateen worked for G4S, a private security contractor that serviced government agencies, including providing security personnel for the Department of Homeland Security. As a result, he had firearms and security officer licenses. He lived in Fort Pierce, a Florida city about 120 miles southeast of Orlando, where over one-third of the population subsists below the poverty line and the official unemployment rate is over 16 percent.

What was going on in the mind of Omar Mateen will likely never be known with any certainty. What is clear, however, is that the horrific tragedy in Orlando is only the latest in a series of bloody incidents. The immense social and political contradictions of American capitalist society are taking ever more malignant forms.

Sunday morning’s death toll in Orlando represented the worst mass shooting on US soil since the American Cavalry’s massacre of 150 Lakota at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in 1890. It took place, however, in the context of an endless procession

of such homicidal outbursts, which have become virtually a daily fact of life in the United States. Since the beginning of 2016, there have been 175 such incidents. Last year there were 372 mass shootings in the US, leaving 475 dead and 1,870 wounded.

Murderous violence at home has developed in parallel with unending wars abroad, with the US military continuously engaged since 2001 in invasions, bombings, drone strikes and “targeted assassinations” that have claimed the lives of over a million people in predominantly Muslim countries. Within the US itself, the most reactionary ideologies have been whipped up to justify discrimination and violence against immigrants in general and Muslims in particular, and to encourage the most backward homophobic sentiments.

The precise confluence of influences that produced the Orlando nightclub massacre may not be known, but that it emerged within an environment shaped by increasing social dislocation, war and political reaction is undeniable.

President Barack Obama made a typically empty speech from the White House on Sunday, declaring the mass killing “an act of terror and an act of hate.” Obama, who recently authorized an escalation of the nearly 15-year-old US war in Afghanistan while simultaneously overseeing US military interventions in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere on the African continent, vowed that “we will stand united, as Americans, to protect our people and defend our nation, and to take action against those who threaten us.”

Hillary Clinton, Obama’s former secretary of state and the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate, was even more explicit in exploiting the tragedy in Orlando to promote US militarism abroad and an escalation of attacks on democratic rights within the US itself. “For now, we can say for certain that we need to redouble our efforts to defend our country from threats at home and abroad,” she said. “That means defeating international terror groups, working with allies and partners to go after them wherever they are, countering their attempts to recruit people here and everywhere, and hardening our defenses at home.”

Her Republican rival, Donald Trump, pursued a slightly different tack, utilizing the Orlando massacre to bolster his promotion of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant bigotry. He initially tweeted that if Obama

failed to attribute the killings to “radical Islamic terrorism” he “should immediately resign in disgrace,” and that if Clinton failed to use the same words she should withdraw from the election.

“Because our leaders are weak, I said this was going to happen—and it is only going to get worse,” he said later in the day. “I am trying to save lives and prevent the next terrorist attack. We can’t afford to be politically correct anymore.”

These reactionary appeals are a warning of what is being prepared, no matter which party wins the 2016 presidential election. The aim of both the Democrats and Republicans is to intimidate, frighten and disorient the American people with the specter of terrorism in order to distract attention from the social crisis, shift the political debate to the right and prepare for both new wars and intensified attacks on the rights and conditions of the working class.



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