

Another American mass shooting, this time in western Kentucky

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Western Kentucky became the scene of the latest American mass shooting on Tuesday morning, when a 15-year-old boy opened fire with a handgun inside Marshall County High School in Benton, killing two and wounding 18.

Baily Nicole Holt, 15, died at the scene. Preston Ryan Cope, also 15, died later at a trauma center. Sixteen other students were struck by bullets, and two more were injured while trying to escape. Three of the injured are reportedly in critical condition at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Knoxville, Tennessee. The injured range in age from 14 to 18.

The assailant, whose identity has not been released, was taken into custody by sheriff's deputies. Authorities have stated that he will face charges of murder and attempted murder. Marshall County Attorney Jeff Edwards said he would be tried as an adult.

The shooting began at 7:57 a.m. The suspect was arrested, apparently without a struggle, at 8:06 a.m. The minutes between are described by witnesses and survivors.

Students were “busting down the gates and fences just to get out,” said Shea Thompson, whose two siblings survived the attack. Her brother Shawn, 15, called her “in complete panic,” she said. “He was yelling: ‘Someone’s shooting! Someone’s shooting!’”

Other students called their parents, including Missy Hufford’s son, Ethan, 15. “[H]e said, ‘Mom, there’s been a shooting.’ And I asked him if he was okay, and he said, ‘I’m running,’” she told a reporter.

The Kentucky shooting came one day after a teenager opened fire in the Italy, Texas high school cafeteria. A 16-year-old girl was wounded in the attack in a small town south of Dallas.

The response from politicians and media to the latest

shootings has followed a tired and predictable pattern, with half-hearted lamentations about the “tragedy” and “senselessness” of the violence, invocations of god and prayer, and attempts to use the event to advance the Republican pro-gun lobby or Democratic gun control agenda.

The politicians dare not confront the most glaringly obvious question: Why do these attacks happen with such frequency in the United States? What is it about American society that incubates the propensity for these crimes, which are so very often carried out by young people?

This is not even western Kentucky’s first mass high school shooting. Just one month ago, area residents gathered to unveil a monument to the victims of the Heat High School shooting of 1997, in which three students were killed and five students wounded by 14-year-old Michael Carneal, who is now serving a life sentence in prison. That shooting took place in West Paducah, just 40 miles from Benton.

Two years later, in 1999, came Colorado’s Columbine massacre, in which two teenagers killed 13 in a high school, and then themselves. Since West Paducah and Columbine, one mass killing has followed the previous one with ever greater frequency.

The epoch of the mass shooting roughly corresponds to the quarter century of war waged by the American ruling class: Iraq (1990), Somalia (1993), Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001-present), Iraq again (2003-present), Libya (2014), and Syria (2014-present).

Over the same time-frame a much longer list of mass killings has taken place, including in the last five years alone the 2017 Sutherland Springs, Texas church shooting (27 dead) and Harvest music festival in Las Vegas, Nevada (59 dead); in 2016 the Pulse Nightclub shootings in Orlando, Florida (49 dead); in 2015 the

San Bernardino, California shooting (14 dead) and the Umpqua Community College shooting, Oregon (10 dead); in 2013 the Washington Navy Yard shooting, Washington DC (13 dead); and in 2012 the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, Newtown, Connecticut (28 dead) and the Century 16 movie theater shooting, Aurora, Colorado (12 dead.)

According to the Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit organization, 2017 was “the deadliest year of mass shootings in modern US history.” The outfit tallied 345 mass shootings, defined as an incident in which four or more people are shot (not including the shooter). Overall, the web site calculates that more than 15,000 people in the US died from gun violence last year, with another 31,000 injured.

Each of the perpetrators of the mass shootings that have taken place at schools, colleges, and workplaces in America over the past quarter century has had his or her individual psychological history. But even individual psychological problems are rooted in social conditions.

The general brutality of American society, the degree to which human beings are treated by the powers that be as thoroughly expendable, has played a role. Government officials routinely refer to “taking out” alleged terrorists or entire governments that stand in the way of US foreign policy. Individuals are dispatched without so much as a second thought, whether through legal, barbaric executions in many US states, or by illegal “targeted assassinations” and drone strikes. Above all, there has been endless war.

A 16-year-old high school student today would have no conscious political memory of any time when America *was not* at war. Quite possibly neither would his parents: A 40-year-old would have been but 13 at the time of Desert Storm, the first war on Iraq.

The last quarter century has also witnessed a vast social and cultural retrogression. There is nothing readily available to help youth to understand history and the potential of humanity. Funding for the arts and social studies have been cut from the public schools, very nearly to the vanishing point. Hollywood, popular music, the entertainment industry as a whole, often appeal to the basest instincts—violence, revenge, moneymaking.

Earlier generations of Americans could turn to the trade unions, or mass movements of working class and middle class youth—including the Civil Rights and

antiwar movements—to understand some of their problems and channel their anger.

Benton sits near the old coal mining regions of eastern Kentucky and southern Illinois and Indiana, near the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. At one time in this region’s history the United Mine Workers (UMW) provided a voice not only to the miners, but to the region’s poor. From the 1890s to the 1940s, union locals—heavily influenced by socialism and, occasionally, powerful national strikes—gave outlet to common problems. Now, where it still exists, the UMW functions as another layer of management. The story is much the same across the country. Only the names of the industries and the unions have to be changed.

In the absence of organized resistance from the working class and the youth—which had been a constant factor in American history for a century previous—there has been nothing to hold the appetites of the ruling class at bay. Social inequality has reached unprecedented levels and continues to accelerate. An entire generation of youth faces the prospect of unemployment or low pay, the inability to start a household, and, with all of that, an attendant mood of hopelessness and desperation.

It is not possible, in short, to understand the contagion of mass violence in the US outside of an understanding of American capitalism, in all of its violence and reaction—and, more necessary still—outside of the fight against it.



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