

Student protests spread over US school shootings

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Thousands of high school students and their supporters rallied Wednesday at the Florida state capitol in Tallahassee, demanding legislative action to prevent further school shootings like the February 14 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

There were sympathy demonstrations and school walkouts across the country, involving many thousands of high school students in at least a dozen states, including Florida, Virginia, Maryland, Washington DC, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, Texas, Colorado, Arizona, Montana and Washington state.

More than a thousand students walked out of high schools across Indian River County and Martin County, Florida, on the state's central Atlantic coast. Some 500 students walked out at Fort Pierce Central High School alone.

In the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio, hundreds of students walked out of Upper Arlington High School and staged a protest in freezing rain and wind, with speakers reading out the names of the 17 students and teachers killed in Florida last week, and the crowd observing a minute of silence for each one.

The only publicized threat of administration retaliation against student protests came in the Houston, Texas suburbs, where the superintendent of Needville school district said that all students who took part in demonstrations during school hours would be suspended from school for three days. The threat was posted on the school's website, and a letter reinforcing the warning was sent to the home of every student.

By far the largest protest was in Tallahassee, where 100 students from Douglas High School, who made the 400-mile trip by bus on Tuesday, spearheaded a rally of several thousand on the steps of the state capitol. Students and their supporters then surged to the offices

of state legislators, demanding meetings on the spot to air their concerns, principally focused on a demand to ban the sale of assault rifles like the AR-15 used by Nikolas Cruz in the rampage in Parkland.

Responding to the usual homilies from legislators, one Douglas student, Sheryl Acqualori, 16, said, "Thoughts and prayers won't stop my brothers and my sisters from dying—action will." She continued, "They are our students, our teachers and our coaches. And they died because you failed."

Many of the state legislators left by side doors to avoid confronting the demonstrators, who raised loud chants of "face us now" and "serve your public, not your pocket" when they saw a Democrat or Republican office-holder. One of the main demands voiced by the protesters was that legislators renounce and return campaign contributions from the National Rifle Association (NRA), the principal lobby for the gun manufacturers.

The campaign launched by the Douglas students has led to calls for two national days of action: school walkouts on March 14, to mark the one-month anniversary of the school shooting, and a national demonstration in Washington DC on March 24, with satellite protests the same day in other cities.

Both of the two main corporate-controlled political parties are maneuvering to contain and control the spontaneous movement of the student youth and their supporters.

The Democratic Party is seeking to use the issue of gun control to channel the protests into support for their candidates in the November mid-term elections, while avoiding addressing the source of the outbreaks of violence in America, not only in schools, but in tragedies like the Las Vegas rampage that killed 58 people last fall and the massacre at a Texas church in

November, when 28 people were killed.

Above all, the Democrats seek to suppress any questioning of the 25 years of unending imperialist war, waged by Democratic and Republican administrations alike, which are at the root of the glorification and promotion of violence in American society.

The Republican Party is also seeking to contain and smother the student protests. In Florida, where the Republicans control the state legislature and the governor's mansion and have promoted the full litany of NRA-backed measures, such as concealed-carry and "stand your ground" laws, Republican state legislative leaders have made well-publicized visits to the Douglas High School building that was the site of the attack by Nikolas Cruz, making a display of sympathy and shedding tears, while in practice rejecting any action.

President Trump met with a group of survivors and family members of the Parkland massacre, as well as representatives of parents from Sandy Hook elementary school in Connecticut, where 20 first-graders and 6 teachers were gunned down in 2012, in a televised "listening session" on Wednesday afternoon.

Even though the visitors were politically vetted, excluding the most militant and articulate students, the session was dominated by expressions of anger and pain by parents of those killed and several student survivors.

"I was born into a world where I never got to experience safety and peace," said Justin Gruber, a student who survived the school shooting, referring to the 19 years since the Columbine High School massacre, which took place before he was born. "There needs to be significant change in this country, because this has to never happen again."

Another student survivor, Samuel Zeif, asked through tears, "How is it that easy to buy this type of weapon? How do we not stop this after Columbine, after Sandy?" He concluded, "We need to do something. That's why we're here."

Besides the president, Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and other officials feigned sympathy for the students and parents, but offered nothing but measures that would lead to even more violence in the schools.

Trump suggested that school teachers, coaches and other staff should be armed with concealed weapons so that they could shoot it out with a prospective attacker.

He cited the example of Aaron Feis, the football coach who threw himself in front of several students to block the bullets being fired at them, sacrificing his own life. "If he had a firearm he wouldn't have had to run, he would've shot and that would've been the end of it," Trump claimed.

When many parents and students indicated their opposition to such a step, which would introduce many more guns into a school setting, creating the potential for much greater violence, Trump verbally retreated, saying, "We can understand both sides. Certainly it's controversial... But we'll study that along with many other ideas."

He told the visitors, "We'll be very strong on background checks, very strong emphasis on the mental health of somebody," although the White House has relaxed administrative requirements on background checks and proposed major cuts in the funding of mental health services.

Trump came equipped with a crib sheet—inadvertently made public when it was captured in photographs of the session—which reminded him to say that he wanted to hear what the parents and students had to say, and to say that he "was listening."

Outside the White House were hundreds of students from schools in the District of Columbia and the Maryland suburbs who walked out of class and marched on Capitol Hill and the White House to demand action against the school shootings.



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