

The significance of the mass student protests against gun violence in America

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Nearly one million students walked out of their classrooms to protest gun violence and mass shootings in America Wednesday, the one-month anniversary of the massacre at a high school in Parkland, Florida.

Walkouts, rallies and demonstrations took place in every state as well as the US territory of Puerto Rico. Protests were also held internationally, including by students in Japan, Tanzania, Israel, Iceland, Mexico, Colombia, Australia, Germany and many other countries throughout Europe.

Wednesday's protests are a prelude to a demonstration organized by the Parkland student survivors for Saturday, March 24. At least half a million people are expected to march on Washington, DC, and nearly 800 demonstrations are planned in every US state and in dozens of countries around the world.

The immediate focus of the demonstrations, heavily promoted by the Democratic Party and mainstream media, is on gun control. Within the political establishment, the "solutions" on offer are confined to either greater militarization and policing of schools or restrictions on the purchase of firearms, which will inevitably be used to increase the powers of the state.

The Republicans and Democrats alike ignore the underlying causes of school violence—unprecedented social inequality, unending war, the consequences of the militarization of society and the defunding of education and social programs—because a serious examination of the roots of this social phenomenon would expose their own role in creating the social crisis out of which it has developed.

Just as there are more fundamental causes behind the epidemic of school shootings, there are more fundamental causes to the eruption of large-scale protests among young people. There is a widespread

sense among these young people that the ease and frequency with which they are massacred in American schools is symptomatic of the indifference and contempt with which the country's ruling oligarchy regards their lives.

In conversations with students throughout the country, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) found that students participating in the demonstrations were concerned by far broader questions than gun control.

In New York, students explained that they attended the event over the issue of access to healthcare, specifically mental health. In Washington, DC, students condemned the military budget and the war drive. In San Diego, students denounced the entire political establishment, saying that they believe "the government is run by corporations."

Kenton, a student in Flint, Michigan, spoke about how social conditions have shaped the outlook of his generation: "Somewhere deep inside, people know they've been dealt a bad hand, and they want to give it back. When my parents and grandparents came here from England, you could get a good job working at a factory. But now, unless you have a college education working in a specific field, you're probably going to end up working at Walmart or a gas station."

Consider the life experience of working-class high school seniors across the US. Born at the turn of the century, they would have turned one year old as the Bush administration declared an open-ended "war on terror," encompassing the entire globe.

When they were eight, the financial crash ushered in a tidal wave of social distress as the newly elected Democratic President Barack Obama funneled trillions of dollars into Wall Street to bail out the banks. Their parents may have been among the millions who lost

their homes through foreclosure, were forced into bankruptcy or were thrown out of work.

At 14, they would have heard the news of the murder of Michael Brown, who was killed in the street by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. They would have watched on television as SWAT teams in combat fatigues, deployed in armored vehicles and bearing loaded assault rifles, shot rubber bullets and pepper spray canisters at demonstrators protesting police violence. They would see similar graphic murders caught on video again and again in the next few years of their high school career. Police killed more than 15,000 people over the span of their lifetime.

Now, 18 years old, these young people face a world beset by unemployment, unending wars, skyrocketing inequality and immense poverty. If they make the decision to go to college, they will be crippled by tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of dollars in student loan debt. Their generation, for the first time in modern history, will live shorter lives and make less money than their parents' generation.

These experiences have shaped the lives of the new generation of working-class youth all over the country. Polls show that more young people in the United States support socialism than support capitalism. There is a healthy hatred of the current president, Donald Trump, whom they recognize as the oligarchic right-wing face of the American political establishment. Millions are equally disillusioned with the Democratic Party, which is widely regarded as a pro-corporate party of Wall Street and the military-intelligence agencies.

What does the Democratic Party offer young people? If the Democrats are successful in realizing the main component of their opposition to Trump—a more aggressive policy toward Russia—it will likely mean the initiation of a war that will see many of the youth protesting on Wednesday sent to kill or be killed in the interests of the geopolitical domination of the American ruling class.

It is worth noting that while the Democratic Party has focused their entire electoral strategy on issues of race, gender, ethnicity and other identities, the school violence protests have brought together largely working-class youth of every racial and ethnic background.

The politically limited form of these protests is bound up with the long-term suppression of working-class struggle by the unions. But when the class struggle

develops, as in the recent West Virginia teachers strike, where educators temporarily broke free of the control of the unions, workers and youth responded powerfully, including with a mass demonstration of high school students in Charleston, the state capital.

The IYSSE welcomes the politicization of young people in the United States and internationally, which is an indication of things to come. What is lacking, however, are a political strategy, program and perspective to resolve the crisis facing working-class youth and the working class as a whole.

The root cause of the unending string of mass violence in America and all the social problems facing youth lies in the capitalist system and the nightmarish world it has created. The basic needs and demands of youth and students cannot be realized outside of the struggle of the working class for political power, and the establishment of a socialist society that will put an end to inequality and war.



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