

# One year since the Parkland high school massacre: A political balance sheet

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14 February 2019

Today marks the one-year anniversary of the deadliest high school shooting in US history. Nineteen-year-old Nikolas Cruz opened fire at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 people, including 14 of his classmates, and injuring 17 more. Some of those killed were as young as 14 years old.

The shooting at Parkland was a harrowing and tragic event, but unfortunately not a unique one. Indiscriminate killings in public schools have, over the last two decades, become frequent occurrences in America.

For the millennial generation, its “Parkland” was the Columbine massacre in Littleton, Colorado, where two teens went on a shooting spree on April 20, 1999, killing 13 people and wounding more than 20 others before turning their guns on themselves and committing suicide.

According to a tally by the *Washington Post*, in the nineteen years between Columbine and Parkland, some 150,000 students at primary and secondary schools in the United States have experienced a school shooting on their campuses, with more than 400 deaths.

For young people nowadays, the term “school shooting” evokes images from television, social media, and, for some, the personal experience of bloodied bodies, heavily armed young men, and teams of SWAT officers with automatic weapons swarming school hallways.

The official response to such tragedies by politicians and media pundits has become routine and ritualized, with hollow calls for “unity” and “remembrance.”

In the aftermath of the Parkland massacre, however, the usual responses only compounded the anger, grief and frustration of young people. Not so easily placated, they organized well over a million people in more than 800 demonstrations in all 50 states and 390 of the country’s 435 congressional districts, plus several protests overseas, to demand an end to mass violence in the schools. A mass demonstration in Washington DC under the banner “March for Our Lives” was one of the largest in the city’s history, with more than 800,000 people in attendance.

The movement adopted the slogan “Never again” as a vow

to eradicate the phenomenon of school shootings for the next generation. Students and young people from all over the country interviewed by reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* associated mass violence with skyrocketing inequality and student debt, militarist violence and war, mass incarceration and police killings, and the destruction of social services and education.

Hundreds of thousands of youth were motivated to take to the streets out of a profound sense that something was deeply wrong with a society so marred by violence. They rallied with the aim of achieving fundamental change. What changes were required and how they would be achieved, however, was not clear to them.

As soon as the plans for demonstrations began to take shape, the Democratic Party moved quickly to narrowly frame the issue as one of gun control. While both the accessibility of assault rifles and the powerful political influence of the fascistic National Rifle Association are rightly viewed by youth as expressions of the irrationality of American society, the single-minded focus on gun control was designed to evade an examination of the deeper social and political causes of the Parkland tragedy.

Framing the issue around a legislative effort served to funnel the movement back into the safe confines of the two-party system. Within a matter of weeks, the “March for Our Lives” organizers were traveling the country on a “Get out the vote” tour aimed at whipping up support for supposedly “progressive” Democratic candidates who support stricter gun laws.

In the meantime, in schools all over the country, in Democratic- and Republican-controlled states alike, measures were taken to “fortify” school grounds. A bill passed by the Florida state legislature at the beginning of the 2018 fall semester allocated \$58 million toward arming teachers. The state even launched a new app designed to anonymously report suspicious activity in the state’s schools. The app, FortifyFL, cost state legislators \$400,000 to develop and is a further step in an effort to monitor and essentially spy on students 24 hours a day.

Despite the Democratic Party takeover of the leadership of the movement, the sentiments animating hundreds of thousands of young people who participated in the “March for Our Lives” protests have not gone away.

What is needed to carry forward the struggle of young people against mass violence is an understanding of the roots of the problem, and, on that basis, a clear conception of who their allies are and who are their enemies.

The cause of mass violence in today’s society is the capitalist system, which subordinates every question to the dictates of private profit. It is this global socio-economic system that produces the two fundamental causes of mass violence: imperialism and inequality.

The brutality of US imperialism dominates not only the political life of the United States, but its culture as well. The youth involved in the protests have grown up in a country and world dominated by the so-called “war on terror,” now in its 18th year. In addition to arming local police forces with surplus military-grade weaponry, the government—under Obama no less than under Bush and Trump—has carried out unending violence abroad, killing millions and destroying entire societies, from Afghanistan and Iraq to Libya and Syria. It has deliberately sought to whip up nationalism, paranoia and xenophobia.

This state of permanent war and mass surveillance of the population has deadly consequences for the social psychology of the country, as witnessed by the fact that the Parkland shooter, Nikolas Cruz, sported his Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) shirt as he carried out the murder of classmates and administrators.

The trillions spent on militarist violence abroad leaves public services, education and health care starved of resources and masses of working class people struggling to make ends meet, and millions more in poverty. The social crisis in the US has reached depths not seen in decades, producing substantial numbers of severely traumatized and psychologically damaged people. Life expectancy has dropped two years in a row, deaths of despair are on the rise, and a drug epidemic has ravaged large swaths of the country.

It is in this social and political context that the “March for Our Lives” protest emerged. One year into the Trump administration, amidst a devastating social crisis, the response to the Parkland shooting marked a significant stage in the radicalization of a new generation of youth in the US, as part of a broader radicalization of the working class internationally.

The “March for Our Lives” protest roughly coincided with a wave of teachers’ strikes that spread across the US and other countries, and continues to this day. The year went on to witness struggle after struggle by workers all over the world: mass protests of youth and workers in Iran; metal

workers, pilots and Amazon workers in Europe; UPS workers in the US; tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka; and the massive Yellow Vest protests in France, among others.

Every significant struggle of the past year has erupted over basic class issues: wages, working conditions, health care, education, police brutality, attacks on immigrants.

This upsurge of working class struggle has struck fear into the global ruling class. The mobilization of workers has been met with censorship and increasingly authoritarian measures by the ruling class of every country.

The response to “March for Our Lives” protests in the US at the hands of both parties has similarly been to increase the forces of repression: more police, more surveillance cameras, more censorship and more regimentation in the schools. Meanwhile, public education continues to be starved of funds.

The way forward for youth and students seeking to end mass violence is to turn to the decisive revolutionary force in society—the working class. Students must link their struggles with those of teachers, who are involved in a determined fight to defend public education, as well as auto workers fighting plant closures and layoffs and workers exploited by low-wage, sweatshop companies like Amazon and UPS.

They must oppose all efforts to channel their struggles behind the Democratic Party, including so-called “progressive” Democrats such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. It is a party of big business and the military, which has served for more than a century as the graveyard of social protest movements—from the industrial unions to the civil rights and anti-war movements—and has done nothing to address the conditions that lead to high school shootings.

There is no answer to the social evils of capitalism outside of a struggle for socialism, based on the united, international mobilization of the working class. It is to this that young people must dedicate themselves, through the building of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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