

Fifty years since the massacre of students at Kent State

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May 4, 2020 marks 50 years since the murder of four unarmed student protesters at Kent State University in northeast Ohio, and the wounding of nine others. All were shot by Ohio National Guard troops who opened fire on a crowd of antiwar demonstrators protesting the decision of President Richard Nixon to escalate the war in Vietnam by sending US troops into neighboring Cambodia.

The killings ripped the mask of “democracy” and “freedom” from the face of American imperialism. It demonstrated to an entire generation that the US ruling class was prepared to use the same savage methods at home against political opposition from below that it was using in its genocidal war in Southeast Asia.

For that reason, the Nixon administration at the time, the Ohio state government and all subsequent state and federal governments, along with the courts, have maintained an intransigent defense of the shootings as legally justified, even if, only grudgingly, there have been official admissions that the shootings by the National Guard were “unwarranted” and “regrettable.”

None of the guardsmen, nor their commanders, nor the Ohio governor who ordered them to occupy the campus and incited them, was ever brought to justice.

The four students killed were all 19 or 20 years old, cut down when they were just starting independent lives and beginning to develop as young adults.

Two of those killed, Allison Krause and Jeffrey Miller, were among the antiwar protesters, although neither was within 200 feet of the soldiers when they opened fire. Miller was hit in the face and died instantly. Krause was hit in the chest and died a few hours later.

The two others who died were not even involved in the protest. Sandra Scheuer, a speech therapy honors student, and William Schroeder, a psychology student and ROTC cadet, were walking between classes. Both were about 130 yards from the soldiers. Scheuer was shot through the neck and bled to death almost immediately. Schroeder, perhaps thanks to his military training, threw himself on the ground when the volley of shots began. A high-velocity bullet struck him in the chest as he lay prone, and he died an hour later.

The nine students who were wounded were at various distances from the National Guard soldiers, but the closest, hit twice, was more than 70 feet away. The furthest was 750 feet away, hit by a bullet that traveled nearly two-tenths of a mile to hit him in the neck. Dean Kahler, 20, the most seriously wounded, has spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down by a bullet that severed his spinal cord. His legs later had to be amputated.

All told, the troops fired at least 67 shots in 13 seconds. At least 28 of the 70 men in the unit opened fire in the fusillade, which followed a discussion among the soldiers as they were pulling back from the students and repositioning themselves at the top of a hill. None of the soldiers has revealed the subject of that discussion, but it is clear that when they opened fire, they were not reacting to a sudden attack or charge by the

students, or in response to the throwing of rocks, bottles or other objects. It was a calculated, aimed barrage, in which several fired more than one shot from their M-1 rifles.

Protesters slandered and vilified

While Nixon did not give the order to fire, he helped create the political climate for the violence, denouncing antiwar student protesters as “bums” only a few days before. Demonstrations had erupted nationwide after his April 30 televised address announcing what he called an “incursion” into Cambodia by US troops searching for bases and weapons stockpiles of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front.

Ohio Governor James Rhodes, who ordered nearly a thousand National Guard soldiers to occupy the Kent State campus, visited the town of Kent on Sunday, May 3, the day before the massacre. The Republican governor denounced protesters as “worse than the brown shirts and the communist element and also the night riders and the vigilantes.” He continued: “They’re the worst type of people that we harbor in America. I think that we’re up against the strongest, well-trained, militant, revolutionary group that has ever assembled in America.”

Actually, like most US college students in that era, the four victims were from middle class families or more privileged sections of the working class. Miller’s father was a typographer at the *New York Times*. Krause’s father was a mid-level executive at Westinghouse. Schroeder’s father spent four decades with US Steel in Lorain, Ohio. Scheuer came from Boardman, a middle-class suburb of Youngstown, Ohio, then also a center of the steel industry. Her father, a German-born Jew, had fled Nazi Germany in 1935, escaping the Holocaust. In an accident of fate, three of the four killed, all but Schroeder, were from Jewish families.

Arthur Krause, Allison’s father, became a spokesman for the families of the victims. He told the national media the day after the killings that his daughter “resented being called a bum because she disagreed with someone else’s opinion. She felt that our crossing into Cambodia was wrong. Is this dissent a crime? Is this a reason for killing her? Have we come to such a state in this country that a young girl has to be shot because she disagrees deeply with the actions of her government?”

Kent State, located in a small town 50 miles south of Cleveland, had not been a hotbed of radical protest. An antiwar protest earlier that year drew only 100 students out of a campus of 21,000. But Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia galvanized opposition throughout the country. Some 500 students gathered for a protest on May 1, the day after the president’s television speech. Protests continued over the weekend, and on the evening of Saturday, May 2, an Army ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) building on campus was set on fire and burned down. Kent Mayor Leroy Satrom declared a state of emergency and asked Governor Rhodes

to send in the National Guard.

The troops were in the vicinity already because they had been mobilized by Rhodes in an attempt to smash a strike by Teamster truck drivers in Akron. They arrived in Kent within hours, accompanied by armored personnel carriers, and immediately clashed with more than a thousand demonstrators. The 900 troops began firing hundreds of rounds of tear gas and threatening the crowd with their bayonets, wounding one student. More than 100 students were arrested, the majority for violating the 8 p.m.-to-dawn curfew imposed by the city government.

On Sunday, May 3, Governor Rhodes himself arrived in Kent to supervise the suppression of the antiwar protests. Hundreds of demonstrators staged a sit-in at an intersection near the campus, pressing demands for the abolition of ROTC, a cut in tuition, amnesty for all those arrested and removal of the guardsmen from the town. The troops used tear gas and bayonets to break up the demonstration and drive the students back on campus.

On Monday, May 4, campus officials tried to ban the scheduled noontime rally, but about 3,000 students gathered anyway. The Guard was ordered to disperse the students, who defied tear gas and threats of arrest. Hundreds of students continued to taunt the soldiers, and at 12:24 pm the guardsmen took aim and opened fire.

The nationwide impact of the killings

The Kent State massacre had a politically galvanizing effect upon millions of young people, who reacted to the killings with outrage and anger. An unprecedented nationwide student strike erupted, involving an estimated 4.3 million students, shutting down or disrupting more than 900 college campuses. The National Guard was dispatched to 21 campuses, while police battled students at another 26. University officials closed down 51 campuses for the remainder of the term. The Kent State campus remained closed for six weeks.

The White House blamed the killings on the students themselves. Nixon's press secretary Ron Ziegler, speaking on behalf of a president whose hands were dripping with the blood of the Vietnamese people, said that the deaths were a warning that "when dissent turns to violence, it invited tragedy."

On the following weekend, well over 100,000 people demonstrated in Washington, DC. Nixon administration officials huddled in their offices, with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger declaring that the US capital "took on the character of a besieged city." Nixon himself fled to Camp David, while armed soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division were stationed inside the Executive Office Building, supposedly to protect it from assault by antiwar protesters.

The greatest fear of the Nixon White House was that the nationwide student protests would intersect with the mass struggles of the American labor movement, following in the footsteps of the events just two years before in France, when student protests in Paris touched off a nationwide general strike that nearly toppled the regime of President DeGaulle.

The response of the ruling class to this danger was not conciliation, but more violence. The Nixon administration turned to its staunchest supporters in the trade union bureaucracy of the building trades. New York union official Peter Brennan, later appointed labor secretary by Nixon, organized an attack on May 8 in which goons dispatched by the bureaucracy savagely beat antiwar protesters in New York City.

A week after Kent State, National Guard troops and state police shot to death six black students and wounded dozens of others in Augusta, Georgia after a protest over the murder of 16-year-old Charles Oatman, a mentally disabled black youth who was beaten to death in the county jail.

The troops and police were ordered into the city by Democratic Governor Lester Maddox, a notorious segregationist.

Three days later, police and state highway patrolmen fired automatic weapons into a dormitory at Jackson State University, a historically black college in the Mississippi state capital, killing two students and wounding nine others. Phillip Lafayette Gibbs, a 21-year-old junior at the school, and James Earl Green, a 17-year-old student at a nearby high school, were shot dead.

The mass protests nonetheless marked a significant turning point in the conduct of the war in Vietnam. The Nixon White House was compelled to withdraw troops from Cambodia within a month of the invasion and announced that the pace of troop withdrawals from Vietnam itself would be increased.

America in political crisis

The Kent State killings marked a new stage in the mounting political crisis within the United States brought on by the confluence of three powerful factors: the mass movement against the Vietnam War, initially centered among college students and youth, but winning increasing support among much broader layers of the population; the civil rights movement, which had dealt powerful blows to the structure of Jim Crow segregation in the South, as well as racial discrimination and police violence throughout the country; and a militant wages movement of the working class.

The student antiwar movement was largely middle class in its social composition. Only 22 percent of American youth aged 20-24 attended college in 1970, and even that figure represented an enormous increase from 13 percent in 1960. Most children of factory workers could not afford to attend a four-year college, and the community college system was still relatively undeveloped. By comparison, in 2020 nearly 60 percent of American youth aged 20-24 are attending college, and the majority of student youth are drawn from the working class.

Mass protests against the US war in Vietnam had been building since 1965, drawing in wide layers of young people besides those in college, as well as sections of the working class. President Lyndon B. Johnson had been forced to withdraw from his reelection campaign in March 1968. The 1968 Democratic Convention had witnessed bloody clashes after Chicago's Democratic Mayor Daley mobilized his police against antiwar demonstrators.

In the US, the long post-World War II economic boom was drawing to a close and the New Deal coalition forged under Franklin D. Roosevelt between organized labor, African-Americans and sections of the middle class was breaking up. Every section of the working class was stirring on the issues of wages, inequality, poverty and war. The mass civil rights movement combined in its final years with a series of spontaneous ghetto rebellions involving the most oppressed sections of African-American workers and youth, who demanded that the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation in the South be followed by genuine social equality.

The entire working class, meanwhile, refused to pay for the costs of the Vietnam War through attacks on its wages and conditions. The year 1970 saw the greatest number of strikes in two decades. Just weeks before Kent State, the first-ever national postal strike had led the Nixon administration to call out the National Guard to move the mail. Earlier, General Electric Co. had been shut down by a militant and protracted strike. Teamster truck drivers struck, and later in the year, General Motors workers went on strike for 67 days.

In this political crisis, the decisive issue was to bring these great social forces together under the leadership of the working class, fighting on the

basis of a revolutionary socialist program. The Workers League, the Trotskyist organization that would go on to found the Socialist Equality Party, put forward such a program in the pages of its newspaper, the *Bulletin*, a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The first *Bulletin* editorial after Kent State denounced the Nixon administration for its claim that the student dissent was responsible for the killings:

It was not the students who fired on National Guardsmen, but Guardsmen who fired on unarmed students. It is not the students who are perpetrating violence and death against the peoples of South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, but Nixon himself. This man, who only last week called students “bums,” together with his frontman Agnew, has been whipping up rightist sentiment against the students and youth for months. It is the Nixon administration which must take responsibility not only for the war, but for the murders at Kent State. And it is the capitalist system which Nixon defends which must take responsibility for Nixon.

The Workers League fought to turn the antiwar students to the working class and build a political movement of working people directed against the capitalist system. That meant a break with the Democratic Party.

But the forces that were in the leadership of the antiwar movement, the Stalinists of the Communist Party and the ex-Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party, demanded that the struggle against the war be separated from the class struggle as a whole, and subordinated it politically to the Democratic Party, first to the McCarthy and Kennedy campaigns in 1968, then to the dead end of the 1972 presidential campaign of George McGovern.

In the final analysis, the ability of these forces to sidetrack the antiwar movement and reinforce the reactionary bureaucracies that sat atop the labor movement was an expression of the residual strength of American imperialism, which still held a dominant position in the world economy. Today, that global economic preeminence is a distant memory. America leads the world in other far more dubious indices: it has the most corrupt, ignorant and unpopular political leadership; it leads the industrialized world in child poverty, police brutality, opioid addiction and other social horrors; and in the current coronavirus crisis, it has lost more of its citizens to disease and death than any other country.

Those seeking to commemorate the Kent State killings on the 50th anniversary are unable to do so because of lockdowns imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The campuses are closed, and political gatherings of any kind are currently impossible. But the lessons of that tragic experience are there to be drawn.

No one should believe that Donald Trump would be less brutal and thuggish in his response to mass opposition than Richard Nixon. Nor would his possible replacements, either Democratic or Republican, be any better. The American ruling elite, which seeks to increase its wealth through financial plunder even in the midst of a deadly epidemic, is both politically and morally bankrupt.

The conditions have already developed, as in the 1960s, but on a far higher level, for the emergence of mass struggles of working people and youth against imperialist war, austerity and repression. The great difference, however, is that the Trotskyist movement, in the US and internationally, is in a far stronger position to win the leadership of the emerging mass movement. The *World Socialist Web Site* has established itself as the authoritative voice of international socialism throughout the world. Its readership is rapidly growing, particularly in the working class.

The old mass labor bureaucracies—the AFL-CIO in the US, the Communist Parties in Europe and elsewhere, the social democratic and

labor parties—have been decimated by the results of their own betrayals, based on their nationalist programs.

The Socialist Equality Party is building the new revolutionary leadership in the United States that will mobilize the vast social power of the American working class as part of the world socialist revolution.



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