

“I shouldn't have to feel like my life is in danger when I am trying to get an education”

Students, teachers and workers rally against gun violence in cities across the US

Our reporters
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Attend an online meeting in your area, co-sponsored by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Educators Rank-and-File Committees, to discuss the causes of mass violence and what must be done to stop it.

On Saturday, thousands of youth, parents and workers participated in over 450 demonstrations in cities across the US to protest against gun violence in schools. The protests were organized by March for Our Lives (MFOL), originally a student movement that emerged in the aftermath of the 2018 Parkland High School massacre.

Since the birth of the movement in 2018, the Democratic Party has done everything in its power to transform it into a campaigning mechanism for various Democratic Party politicians. By narrowly framing the issue of mass violence as one of gun control, it has sought to convince youth that school shootings will be ended simply by electing Democrats to office.

Four years later, the MFOL movement has lost considerable support among youth. The protests in the aftermath of the horrific Uvalde, Texas elementary school shooting drew significantly smaller crowds in most cases. However, many students and youth who did attend expressed outrage over mass shootings and were eager to discuss the broader social and political issues behind them.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality spoke to youth, parents, and workers at protests around the country. IYSSE members also distributed copies of the recent statement, “The way forward for students and youth in the fight against school shootings.”

Chicago

In Chicago, the IYSSE spoke with students, teachers, and young workers at a rally in Federal Plaza.

One 9th grade Chicago Public School student spoke on his frustration with politicians and with capitalism, “I am tired of not seeing any action from politicians on this issue. It's honestly really scary to see them not care and let this continue.” He continued, “I think it's connected to capitalism. It's getting more and more unequal and more and more barbaric as time goes by. It's like what Rosa Luxemburg said: We are faced with a choice between socialism and barbarism. That could not be more true right now. I think capitalism has to end.”

The student also said of the response to the pandemic by the US government, which has produced new levels of hunger and inequality, “It's a failure of the capitalist system.”

Another Chicago high school student had similar comments. “Gun violence is happening every single day in America. It is worrying, you don't know where it is going to happen next.” The young man continued, “There is bigger inequality in America than during the French Revolution... Billionaires rule America as if they were oligarchs. I think that's definitely one of the big causes [of mass violence].”

Emma, a young office worker said: “I hear that phrase, ‘to vote people out’ at this rally, and I just keep thinking, with a Democratic president, a Democratic Congress voting, I don't think they have the material interest in their minds. For politicians saying that only the military or the police should have access to high caliber weapons or things like that: I don't think that they should even have access to those.”

“This is how I feel about it: emotionally exhausted,” said Brooke, a young legal assistant. “I grew up in Denver, Colorado after Columbine, and I remember every time another shooting happened we had to do a drill. And if we didn't take it seriously enough the teacher would have us watch news clippings from Columbine. It's been here forever, and it seems kind of ridiculous that at 25 [years old], growing up in elementary school with these types of drills, living our entire lives post-Columbine, and nothing has changed.

“There's been so much talk, but no action. It's just gotten worse and worse, and so many people have gotten hurt. And it's wild to think that it's even a question that guns are more important than peoples' lives and children's lives. The government is also like taking away rights to abortion, forcing people to have children, but then they turn around and don't care that those children may get murdered?”

A customer service worker named Katie also spoke to the WSW. She criticized the role of the Democratic Party in exacerbating the social problems that lead to gun violence. “I thought there was going to be a lot of change after [the Parkland shootings]. I really, really hoped that maybe that maybe that would spark something. And now, nothing's changed at the end of the day.”

Rebecca, a librarian, said she does not think that arming and pouring social spending into the police are the answers to the problem of mass shootings. “We've been told so much that like the police are good, the police are protectors. And they did nothing [during the Uvalde school shooting], so that whole argument just came crashing down. And people are still like, ‘We just need more police. We need more security.’ And that did nothing.

“I think you look at most places like most, most budgets, it's going to policing and the military-like guise of safety and protection, and we're no safer. I think that's why emotionally exhausted as for how I feel. There has to be a shift.”

Paige and Anita are elementary school teachers in districts south of the Chicago metropolitan region. “I’m a kindergarten teacher,” Anita said of the gun violence affecting schools. “They’re hard conversations to have. You try not to scare your kids, ‘Oh, it’ll never happen here.’ But it could happen. Seeing all that and trying to navigate those waters with your students and letting parents know... It’s been so difficult. We’re frustrated.”

“I teach first grade,” Paige said. “It’s hard to have conversations with young children who don’t understand. I don’t want them to feel fear coming to school. We’re being trained for things we’re not ready for. We have to have a lot of hard conversations.”

“We’re still seeing the same problems over and over,” Paige added, “in schools, grocery stores and movie theaters. It’s everywhere.”

Both of them expressed frustration with the political system. “It’s hard to ask our political leaders to do more and they’re still not doing anything,” Paige said.

Anita also spoke out about how the social crisis is affecting teachers. “We’re currently in a teacher shortage,” she said. “No one wants to be a teacher anymore if you’re asked to be the shield or be the social worker.”

“It’s causing a lot of teachers to leave the profession in droves,” Paige added.

“And it’s really hard on the teachers that are staying,” Anita concurred. “We’re getting to the breaking point. Ohio just passed a bill to allow teachers to carry [weapons] in the classroom. We were talking, I guess ‘I’ll quit’ and say ‘No more.’ Teachers continually get stepped on.”

“I taught remotely for half the year last year and then we wore masks the other half. This year, the masks started coming off and it was hard with COVID still prevalent. It still is. The restrictions went lax so parents stopped having their kids getting tested. Kids would be out sick. In my district we were having at least 15 cases a building. It was high. It’s been frustrating to go from that straight to [more] gun violence...”

While teachers have faced dangerous conditions throughout the pandemic, Paige and Anita were forced into bad contracts by the teachers unions and the school districts. “In our past contract, we have a ‘no strike’ clause,” Anita said. “We were stopped from ever speaking. There’s a lot of districts by us that have a ‘no strike’ clause. They’re stopping you before you can ever use your voice.

“The cost of living and our wage are not equal. It’s something we are trying to fight for. It’s a constant battle. It’s hard. We need jobs...this is what we went to school for.”

Paige added, “It’s what I want to do, but it’s getting harder and harder every year.”

“And we end up getting students who are so depressed and sad and they end up taking it out,” Anita observed, speaking of the effects of the social crisis and the pandemic on students. “Our students with low socioeconomic standing, you can see every day in the classroom how difficult it is with a difficult home life.”

“And schools should be a safe haven,” Paige said, “and not a place where they should worry about someone coming with a gun. It’s a good place for them to be, but when things like the [events in Texas] happen, that’s not so much the case...”

San Diego

In San Diego, the WSWWS spoke with Paul, a survivor of the March 5, 2001 Santana High School shooting during which 15-year-old student Charles Andrew Williams shot 15 people, killing two students.

“I am a survivor of the Santana High School mass shooting that happened back in the early 2000s. It’s actually difficult to talk about what

happened that day. I’m sick of this! Every time I see news of another shooting, it brings back PTSD. I will say that these events really affect everyone.”

Responding to the indifference to human life at the hands of the ruling elite in response to the pandemic, war and these mass shootings, Paul said: “The government, both Democrat and Republican, are ignoring the facts and the rest of us. They just want to support their base at the top. I’m here because I’m so angry that this keeps happening. The Democrats have capitulated again, and the people continue to be battered. I’m actually surprised by how many people showed up to the protests today. People are so fed up!”

Milly, a high school student in San Diego, said, “These shootings have me terrified and angry. When I was in kindergarten, there was an active shooter on our campus. Luckily no one got hurt, but I’ve been terrified of this at school since I was four years old.”

Leia, a student at Helix Charter High School, recalled how earlier shootings impacted her political outlook: “Sandy Hook was the first one I remember. It happened to kids our age at the time or a year younger, and it has just gotten worse and more frequent. It’s little kids, it’s horrific and disgusting. The way people take money from the NRA and do nothing in Congress, it’s ridiculous!”

Leia also spoke to the US interest in carrying out imperialist violence abroad through endless war while violence runs rampant within the US: “The US spends so much time worrying about places like the Middle East and the names that they call them! Such as ‘shithole countries’ and so on, and are consistently sending troops for war, when we have in our country, a leading cause of death for children is gun violence. They are just not affected by it... People in Congress are *rich*, they have money, they are at the top of the food chain and are not affected like the rest of us. This is why there have not been changes, they care about their own interests. They do not care about ours.”

Alina, a student from Helix Charter High School, said: “It’s just extremely frustrating. Shootings at schools have happened for years. Even before I was born there was shootings. Regarding the Democratic Party, we like to think of them as better because they are more left, but they are just the same [as the Republicans]. They are not doing anything, they don’t care about our lives. They don’t understand the fear we have to go through every day. We risk our lives just going to school. Anytime a fire drill goes off, a lockdown drill goes off, there is always that thought in your mind, ‘Oh my god, is this the day that my school gets shot up, that I’m going to lose my life or my friend’s life. They don’t care, they don’t understand, they just care about their money and their control over us. They do nothing!”

“The very next day [after the Uvalde massacre] at the elementary school I had to drop my little sister and brother off, and I was going to cry because I could not fathom anything happening to them! They [the government] don’t care! They don’t care at all!”

She went on to say: “We are the ones who keep this country running, and also we are going to be the future and will decide what continues to go on. I want to say, ‘Don’t lose hope.’ So many times I have felt a complete feeling of hopelessness that nothing is ever going to change. But you have to stop there and continue working on it. I’m determined!”

A first grade teacher who wished to remain anonymous said: “In my class, one girl’s parents called me to tell me that she won’t go into a room alone anymore. My coworker taught his kids how to play dead. What really made us cry was that we tell our students we will protect them, but we don’t know if we can. It is so heartbreaking and we feel so conflicted.”

New York City

In New York City, several hundred people gathered in Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn.

A group of young people from New York City's theater industry spoke to the IYSSE at the rally. Ris, a theater technician, explained, "I just graduated from college. I have had to experience shooter drills for the last sixteen years. It sucks to grow up this way. In Santa Cruz, California schools, we could not wear blue or red because those were gang colors. Our parents talk about how 'We had the nuclear threat when we were young.' This is worse because of the frequency. We had bomb threats at school and cops banging on the door in active-shooter drills.

"A lot of student shootings are a result of mental health problems, and not being noticed. There is so much pressure on young people with social media. They break down easier. I want gun controls but I don't think the politicians are going to listen. I am here because I would rather do something than not, to be able to tell my grandchildren I did something."

Kyleigh, one of Ris's friends, became an accountant to supplement her income because of the difficulty in getting acting jobs, especially with pandemic theater closures. "I learned the NRA [National Rifle Association] is a nonprofit and does not pay taxes, like a religious organization. If teachers are taxed, they should be, too. There are a lot of guns on the street because there is access to all those excess guns made for the military. I think if the higher politicians are not going to do anything, maybe we have to do a lot more at the local level."

Detroit

In Detroit, a young student named Gray, 17, told our reporters that he has never felt safe in school: "School shootings happen so often. Government officials say that something will change and then it never happens. It is always empty promises and I got sick of it. I shouldn't have to feel like my life is in danger when I am trying to get an education and go somewhere with my life and fear that my life will end at the hands of someone else."

On the question of the impact of thirty years of war, Gray added, "I don't believe in war. I shouldn't have to give my life for things to change. My life shouldn't be a number in a rising percentage of violence in this world."

Marcus and Lucas, two students from Oakland Community College who attended the Detroit rally, spoke on the way forward for the movement to end school shootings.

"We can't do the 'vote blue no matter who' thing anymore. It does not work. The two-party system is what is killing this country. I think people fail to realize that once the workers come together and join under a common cause things will start happening. And that is what they are scared of because once it happens, they are screwed. It is the workers that put [the rich] in these positions. It is the workers that allow them to make 11,000 times more than their employees. It's the workers that line their pockets."

Lucas added, "Once the backs that they walk on walk away, then they are in trouble."



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