The mass shootings in California and the social pathology of capitalism

Niles Niemuth
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On Monday a gunman, identified as 69-year-old agricultural worker Chunli Zhao, opened fire on workers at two farms in Half Moon Bay, California, killing seven and critically injuring another. Zhao was arrested by police after they found him parked in his car outside the town's police station.

The bloody spree came less than two days after an attack on a party at a dance studio Saturday night in Monterey Park, California, which killed 11 people and left nine injured. That attack is the deadliest mass killing in Los Angeles County's history. The suspect, Huu Can Tran, 72, died of an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound after a standoff with police.

And less than a week before that, six members of a family were gunned down in their Goshen, California home, "assassination style," according to police, who reported that the attack may be related to the illicit drug trade. The victims include a sixteen-year-old mother and her 10-month-old child. So far, no suspects have been identified.

These three attacks are just the deadliest of 39 mass shootings so far this year in the United States, according to the Gun Violence Archive (GVA). The GVA counts a mass shooting as an incident in which at least four people are injured or killed, not counting the shooter. This year is on pace to exceed 2021 as the worst year for mass shooting in the United States.

While mass shootings are well known as an American phenomenon, the pace and number of shootings have shot up since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2014 and 2019, the US averaged 348 mass shootings per year, or less than one a day. In 2020, the number skyrocketed to 611, then hit 690 in 2021 and 647 in 2022, averaging nearly 1.8 per day.

More information will come out about the specific motivations behind the latest horrific events. But understanding mass shootings is not fundamentally a matter of individual motivation. Mass violence is a social phenomenon, and social phenomena require social explanations. What about American society produces these events?

The response to these attacks by the ruling elite has become ritualized, with the now-standard offer of "thoughts and prayers" for the victims. We are told traumatized communities will "stand strong." The Democrats thump the table about new gun control laws and bans on assault rifles, while Republicans rule out any limits and shed tears about the country's deep mental health crisis. Amid the hand-wringing and bitter recriminations, they paper over the deep social crisis, for which both parties are responsible.

The pandemic itself has the character of a massive trauma inflicted on the population. Due to the refusal of the ruling class to tolerate the necessary measures to stop the spread of the virus, more than one million people have died in the United States, and millions more have been impacted by the death of family members, the effects of Long COVID and the general social dislocation of the past three years.

The pandemic was a trigger event that acted upon and exacerbated all of the negative social tendencies that mar American society. Extreme economic inequality has risen to new heights, with the ultra-wealthy capturing almost all growth in wealth and income. The for-profit health care system has been pushed beyond its limits, leaving hospitals overwhelmed and health care workers burned out. Dramatically rising inflation has undermined wages and driven up the cost of food and housing. Now, a growing wave of layoffs and rising interest rates orchestrated to blunt workers' demands for higher wages and better conditions is already throwing tens of thousands out of work.

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These products of ruling class policy are combined with the reactionary character of the ruling class order. This includes the normalization of nuclear war threats; the celebration of killing and assassination abroad; an unending wave of police killings at home, which were at their highest ever in 2022; and a homicidal approach to the COVID-19 pandemic that has eviscerated public health.

The US media is seeking to quickly move on from the California shootings as it cheers on the decision, announced on Tuesday, to send battle tanks to Ukraine, and to flood the country with ammunition and artillery shells.

As far as the ruling class is concerned, life is very cheap. As the WSWS explained in its 2023 New Year perspective, “In their promotion of ‘herd immunity’ as a legitimate response to the pandemic and in their willingness to risk nuclear war in a confrontation with Russia, the imperialist powers are demonstrating a homicidal contempt for the lives of the great mass of the world’s population.”

Democratic President Joe Biden summed up the attitude of the entire political establishment to the lives of masses of people when he remarked offhand last week that he “stopped thinking about” the fact that one million people are dead from the pandemic.

As for the Republican Party, it is mired in fascistic filth, two years after the January 6 insurrection. Indeed, a growing number of mass shootings are explicitly motivated by far-right politics, as in the case of the attack on a Fourth of July parade in Highland Park, Illinois last year, which killed seven.

However, the crisis of the capitalist system that produces mass shootings and war is also laying the basis for immense revolutionary struggles. The mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system on the basis of a socialist program, for universal health care, for the expropriation of the big banks and billionaires, for workers’ democratic control over the economy and essential industries, is the progressive way out of the current social morass that produces mass killings and reactionary violence.

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