

Panic at America's malls: Class tensions at the breaking point

28 December 2016

The scenes of chaos and panic that played out at more than 15 shopping malls across the United States on Monday convey the tense and explosive character of social life in America at the end of 2016.

What began as one of the busiest shopping days of the year ended with large-scale evacuations, dozens of arrests, numerous injuries and entire malls on police lockdown.

Heavily armed police cleared crowds of youth at a number of shopping malls, primarily those located in working-class neighborhoods. Bystander video shows hysterical shoppers running away as police armed with assault rifles and military helmets move in to subdue large groups of youth.

Though there is no indication that the gatherings of young people were coordinated, a remarkable pattern emerges from what can be pieced together about the separate events.

In the early evening, as the malls reached peak activity, hundreds of young people began to converge in what the youth billed as “fights” in social media posts. Small scuffles broke out between individual young people, most of whom were on winter break from high school, and the crowds grew larger.

Word passed and a mood of panic set in. Rumors of shooting incidents spread rapidly. Jittery onlookers interpreted loud noises as gunshots. There were many reports of people shouting, “Gun!” People were injured as thousands sought to flee the crowded malls for the perceived safety of their cars.

At a mall in Elizabeth, New Jersey, a local news program reported “chaotic panic and everybody running all at once” after the sound of a chair slamming into the floor was mistaken for gunfire. An eight-year-old and a 12-year-old were injured in the evacuation as police surrounded and entered the mall.

In Garden City, New York, where seven people were

injured, eyewitnesses described a “stampede” after dozens of people called police, erroneously believing a shooting was taking place. In Newport News, Virginia, a local news organization reported that people “were running out of the mall screaming; some people feared for their lives after they heard rumors that someone was running around the mall with a gun.”

Police cleared two malls in Memphis, Tennessee and arrested seven youth after fights and false reports of shootings. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, youth set off firecrackers and “kicked off a wave of panic,” according to a CNN report. In Brentwood, Ohio, outside Cleveland, police placed a mall on lockdown and arrested a young person “for attempting to strike an officer that was dealing with another disorderly patron.” Police used pepper spray to disperse the crowd.

Five young men between the ages of 14 and 16 from Hartford, Connecticut, a largely impoverished city, were arrested at a mall in nearby Manchester, where officers called in backup from neighboring jurisdictions and descended on the facility to break up gatherings of hundreds of youth. Similar events took place in Farmington, Connecticut; Aurora, Illinois; Fort Worth, Texas; Syracuse, New York; Monroeville, Pennsylvania; Tempe, Arizona; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Aurora, Colorado, where police reported that over 500 youth “surrounded an off-duty officer” who was attempting to detain another youth.

Meanwhile, the city of Chicago was hit by the most deadly wave of shooting violence in twenty years, with 53 wounded and 11 killed on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. As *DNAInfo* reported, “Behind this year’s surge is a toxic mix of cuts to social services, unemployment, hopelessness...”

Just hours before the mall disorders took place, and after the devastating weekend in Chicago, Obama was

interviewed on CNN by David Axelrod, his former campaign manager. Amidst much laughter and mutual flattery, Obama touted his presidential tenure and presented himself as a fighter for social justice. “I would argue that during the entire eight years that I’ve been president, that spirit of America has still been there in all sorts of ways,” he declared.

In his end-of-the-year press conference on December 16, Obama spoke of “how far we’ve come over the past eight years,” before adding that “by so many measures, our country is stronger and more prosperous than it was when we started. That’s a situation that I’m proud to leave for my successor.”

The mall eruptions expose as a lie the saccharine picture of America painted by the corporate press and Obama as his administration draws to a close. That mini-riots took place in fifteen different locations located hundreds of miles from one another shows that something is profoundly wrong with America.

Monday’s free-for-all in Aurora, Colorado took place at the same mall where James Holmes killed 12 people and injured 70 others in July 2012. Since Obama took office, 122 people have been killed in school shootings alone. The response of the government has been two-fold: empty banalities and the militarization of the police.

Though concerns for their immediate safety may have provoked shoppers to take flight, the underlying anxieties are rooted in social relations that are dominated by the vast levels of economic inequality that loom over every aspect of life in the United States.

The outbursts of violence and fear took place against the backdrop of a holiday season ritualized by the media to conceal the brutal fact that all human relations are mediated through the buying and selling of commodities. While this process reaches a fever pitch at Christmas—the make-or-break period for retail profits—the commodification of human relations, with the general tension and frustration it produces, is essential to all social relations under capitalism.

The United States is a country dominated by a financial oligarchy, both economically and politically. The vast majority of the people have no outlet for expressing their own social interests. All of the official institutions, including the corporate-controlled media, the two big-business parties and the trade unions, are dedicated to stifling social opposition and generating

higher corporate profits.

Half of all high school students—those fifteen years of age and younger—have never lived a day when the United States was not at war. Completely abandoned by the political establishment and hostile to the wars, poverty, state surveillance and police violence that have dominated their entire conscious lives, those youth who were old enough to vote in the Democratic primary contests voted for the self-proclaimed “socialist” Bernie Sanders by a nine-to-one margin over Hillary Clinton.

In his interview with Axelrod, Obama did not even address the character of the incoming Trump administration, which is promising to be the most reactionary in US history. In three weeks, Trump and his cabal of billionaires, evangelicals, generals, fascists and close relatives will control the executive branch. The incoming administration has promised a nuclear arms race, an assault on Social Security, Medicare and public education, and the deportation of millions of immigrant workers and their families.

This holiday season, the vast majority of workers share neither the complacent and cynical optimism of Obama, nor the blind bullishness of the stock market. What took place in America’s malls on Monday provides an inkling of the profound social shocks on the horizon for 2017.

The mood that predominates in America as the year concludes is one of nervousness and frustration combined with an emerging combativeness that has yet to find a progressive political expression. What is needed is a movement of the working class to direct the coming social explosion in a revolutionary and socialist direction.

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