

The protests against school shootings and the growth of the class struggle

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Millions of students and young people are participating in demonstrations today in 800 cities throughout the United States, along with many other cities internationally.

According to a USA TODAY/Ipsos Poll, more than one in five people between 13 and 17 said they would participate in the demonstrations, which would make the protests the largest student-led demonstrations in the history of the United States. Another 25 percent of youth say they plan on participating on social media.

The “March For Our Lives” protests were initially called and organized by survivors of the February 14 Parkland, Florida school shooting, which left 17 students dead and another 17 injured. School shootings have affected an entire generation. According to an analysis by the *Washington Post*, since the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, 193 primary or secondary schools have experienced a shooting on campus during school hours, directly impacting 187,000 students.

School shootings, however, have become the focus of a much broader set of grievances. There is a general sense among youth that the regularity with which they are massacred in their schools reflects the indifference and contempt with which the ruling class views their lives.

The *New York Times* nervously pointed to the political radicalization of young people reflected in today’s protests in an article posted on Friday. “As a group,” the *Times* noted, “they combine liberal social beliefs with an intensely wary view of the existing political and economic order, opinion polls have found.”

The *Times*’ oblique remark about hostility to the “economic order” is a reference to polls that show more young Americans would prefer to live in a socialist or communist society than in a capitalist one. Surveys of Americans between the age of 18 and 29 show that only 14 percent think that the country is headed in the right direction, a figure that, if anything, is even lower among high school youth.

Working-class youth today face conditions far worse than their parents, who are themselves confronting a historic reversal in their conditions of life. The median earnings of young people are 43 percent lower than in 1995. Average student debt has increased to \$37,712, from \$24,000 in 2008. Nearly one in five children in the US under the age of 18 live in poverty, while more than 40 percent live in low-income households that make less than twice the official federal poverty level.

The growth of a political movement of young people is coming amidst an expanding wave of working-class struggle throughout the United States and internationally. The strike by West Virginia teachers in February-March has been followed by a one-day strike by New Jersey teachers and calls and plans for walkouts in Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, Tennessee and other states. Internationally, protests of teachers and educators have erupted in Kenya, Nigeria, Argentina, Jamaica, the Netherlands, the UK, Slovenia, Canada and other countries.

The opposition among teachers is an expression of a broader anger in the entire working class over record social inequality. On Thursday, tens of thousands of train drivers, teachers, nurses, air traffic controllers and other public-sector workers in France went on strike against President Emmanuel Macron’s right-wing labor reforms.

The simultaneous development of a movement among workers and student youth portends a major eruption of social and class conflict.

The Democratic Party and the media are seeking to restrain the anger of young people to calls for gun control—which, if implemented, would inevitably be connected to efforts to increase state power and the monitoring of the population. Moreover, as the bombing spree in Austin, Texas has demonstrated, such measures would not halt the epidemic of mass violence in the United States, which would find different forms.

The main concern of the ruling class is to prevent a

movement that addresses the underlying cause of violence in American society, which would inevitably connect the protests of youth with the struggles of workers. The Democrats hope that they can direct student anger to the “ballot box”—that is, to electing Democrats in elections this year and in 2020.

Any serious examination of the causes of gun violence, however, points to the catastrophe produced by the capitalist system.

It is impossible to separate the series of homicidal acts by alienated and brutalized individuals from a broader mood of despair and hopelessness produced by disastrous social conditions and the suppression of any progressive opposition to the capitalist system. According to one recent study, the suicide rate for white children and teens soared by 70 percent between 2006 and 2016, while the suicide rate for black children and teens increased by 77 percent.

Nor can violence at home be separated from violence abroad. Those involved in the protests today have lived their entire lives under the “war on terror”: the invasion of Afghanistan nearly 17 years ago, in 2001; the invasion of Iraq in 2003; the bombing of Libya in 2011; the ongoing US-backed civil war in Syria. More wars are on the agenda.

Trillions of dollars are spent on armaments, while resources for public education, health care (including mental health) and other social services are slashed. The Trump administration signed a budget yesterday, backed by Democrats and Republicans, that allocates a record \$700 billion to the Pentagon, even as the ruling elites insist that there is no money to ensure that teachers are paid a decent wage and young people who graduate college are not burdened by tens of thousands of dollars in debt.

The fact is that the greatest purveyor of violence is the American state, abroad and within the country. While 122 people have been killed in school shootings since the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, police have killed some 2,000 people a year over the same period, many of them youth and students.

The bloody violence of American imperialism—and the cheering of this violence by the media—has the most noxious consequences within the United States. It infects the political culture of the entire country, of which the presidency of Donald Trump is only one expression.

Since the mass protests that erupted following the inauguration of Trump just over a year ago, the Democratic Party has devoted all its efforts to directing

mass opposition to his right-wing and fascistic policies behind a campaign for aggression in the Middle East and against Russia. They have hailed CIA torturers and military commanders guilty of war crimes as the champions of democratic rights. If their agenda was to be realized, it would mean that many of those participating in protests would be sent off to war.

The emergence of protests and demonstrations among workers and student youth resembles the conditions that developed in France in 1968. The ability of the ruling class to contain social unrest, however, has been severely undermined. The parties of the political establishment, in the US and internationally, are deeply discredited. The Stalinist and Social Democratic organizations that fifty years ago worked to contain working-class struggles no longer exist or have moved sharply to the right. The right-wing, anti-working-class trade unions are seeking desperately to suppress a movement that is developing outside of and in opposition to them.

For young people seeking a way forward, the turn must be to the working class. The struggles of working-class youth must be linked to the fight of all workers for decent jobs, wages, health care, and a secure retirement. The fight against the conditions that produce violence in America must be consciously developed as a movement against war, inequality, and the capitalist system. This requires a complete break with the Democratic and Republican Parties and the state apparatus of the ruling class.

The Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, are building a socialist political leadership in the working class. We call on young people participating in the protests today, and all students and workers throughout the world, to join the IYSSE and the SEP and take up the fight for socialism.

Joseph Kishore

To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wswp.org>