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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Genevieve Leigh and Kayla Costa
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One million students walk out of class to protest gun violence and mass shootings in the US

On Wednesday, the one month anniversary of the Parkland shooting that killed fourteen students and three teachers, one million middle school and high school students in the US and internationally walked out of class to protest gun violence and mass shootings in America.

The initial call for the protest came from Empower, the youth movement of the Democratic Party-controlled Women's March organization. It was planned as a walkout in which students would leave class and congregate on school grounds for 17 minutes of silence, one for each victim of the Parkland massacre. The central theme was to be on gun control, which was dominant in the slogans and speeches of many of the protests.

Many school administrators decided not to block walkouts but instead coordinated with the Democratic Party and the police to control the message as closely as possible. Some vetted students' signs, chants, and speeches in advance and prevented students from speaking to the press.



Demonstration in Washington, DC

In other cases, school administrators threatened detention, suspension or more severe punishment to students who participated in the protests. More than 100 students in Goshen, Kentucky defied their school administration’s threats of suspension by walking out in the middle of class. The students have all received detention.

In Concord, California, Mt. Diablo High staff locked the school gates around campus before the scheduled 10 a.m. walkout. Around 10:15 a.m. students broke through a back gate and marched out of the school shouting “Enough is enough!” before school staff marshalled them back to campus.

Despite the efforts to control the message, many of the student walkouts and demonstrations were organized independently of Empower and developed into much larger events out of the control of the state-sanctioned politics of either party. In some cases, hundreds of students gathered away from school grounds to give speeches in which they took up not only school violence and gun control, but the broader social crisis in the US.

Marquan, a senior at Pioneer High School in Ypsilanti, Michigan spoke to an audience of 500 during a rally for all high school students in Washtenaw County, Michigan. He explained that their demonstration was “about something bigger than gun violence alone” which was a “symptom of a much larger problem.” Marquan and other student speakers went on to cite lack of health care, mass incarceration, and the inhumane treatment of immigrants as expressions of the same problems bound up with gun violence.



Marquan

Marquan told the WSWS afterwards, “Millions of people go without health care, we have the highest incarceration rate in the world, and our planet is being destroyed by climate

change. There are a lot of things going on, and we're starting to recognize this now. It's not the people who don't care about these things, but the few, the ruling elite, who put profit over the value of someone's life, who don't care. The NRA [National Rifle Association] bribes our politicians, and it's the same as big oil and big pharma. They put profit over life."

The protests varied in form and scope. At Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland, several hundred students walked out of classes and sat silently in the school bus drop-off zone. Approximately 3,000 high school students in Madison, Wisconsin marched on the state capitol building where they rallied and listened to speeches.

Many university campuses held similar events. At the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, about 2,000 students gathered on the lawn for a vigil accompanied by student speeches.

Students from 28 middle schools and high schools in Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia walked out of class and converged in front of the White House. The students sat with their backs facing the White House for 17 minutes before marching to the US Capitol for a rally.

Similar events took place in all 50 states as well as Puerto Rico, and dozens of protests were held internationally by students in Japan, Tanzania, Israel, Iceland, Mexico, Colombia, Australia, Germany and several other countries in Europe.

It was at the protests in Washington, DC that the efforts to channel social anger back to the safe confines of establishment politics were most strongly felt. Democratic candidates for the 2018 midterm elections could be seen mixing throughout the crowd. The leadership of the Democratic Party, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, and Georgia Representative John Lewis worked to limit the focus of the demonstration solely on the issue of gun control and "taking on the NRA."

Bernie Sanders, who calls himself a socialist, sounded a general theme in encouraging students to vote for Democrats in November. "All across the country, people are sick and tired of gun violence, and the time is now for all of us together to stand up to the NRA and pass common sense gun legislation," Sanders declared.

Sanders was silent on the bipartisan cuts to funding for essential social programs—including education and mental health counseling—enacted to pay for corporate tax cuts and the Pentagon's \$700 billion budget.

Despite the official framework of the protests, the sentiments animating students went well beyond gun control and hostility to the NRA. Across the country young people expressed their frustrations and anger with the entire political establishment.



Diana (left) and Ashley

Ashley and Diana spoke to WSWS reporters in Washington, DC about the conditions that lead to violence at schools. “The United States gave guns to people in South America. The United States gave guns to people in Mexico. That fuels the drug trade, that contributes to violence and perpetuates violence,” Diana said.

Speaking about the importance of social services, Ashley explained, “We need to stop this war budget and put money where it matters. People want to talk about mental health, they should fund mental health resources. People want to talk about education, they should fund schools.”

Max and Anaya, juniors at San Diego High School, indicated that they each personally knew victims of gun violence. Anaya explained how incidents of gun violence in schools have become part of everyday life for her generation noting, “It never seems to stop.”

“It’s pathetic that we even have to do this [protest],” Max exclaimed. “All presidential administrations, not just Trump, but Obama too haven’t confronted this problem at all. The government is run by corporations rather than proper representatives of the people.” He agreed that unending war is a significant cause of gun violence, adding that wars abroad are “about domination,” not the justifications offered by politicians.



Anaya and Max in San Diego

Adrys, a student in the Bronx, New York said that the problem of mass shootings is not solely about being pro-gun or anti-gun, “We have a gun issue, and a mental health issue and a capitalist issue.” Law enforcement and officials knew that the Parkland shooter wanted to carry out an attack, she explained, but “nobody did anything.”

After considering a way to resolve the problem of school violence, Adrys said, “Things should be done for the greater good, and movements are important. Some people in seats of power are abusing their power. But it is the working class that has the power ... If we unite, then we have the power.”