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The political significance of the shooting attack on US congressmen

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On Wednesday morning, James Hodgkinson opened fire on a group of Republican congressmen, lobbyists, staff and police at a baseball field in a Washington, D.C. suburb, injuring Republican Majority Whip Steve Scalise and four others. Hodgkinson, a supporter of Bernie Sanders, was shot and killed by police at the scene of the attack.

Scalise remains in critical condition and has undergone three surgeries. This is the second time in less than a decade that a congressperson has been shot. In 2011, Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot in the head by a right-wing attacker, Jared Loughner.

As is usually the case when an event of this sort takes place, the media is long on moralizing hypocrisy and short on political analysis. The *New York Times* took time out from its hysterical anti-Russian campaign to solidarize itself with Trump, stating: “President Trump said just the right thing after the attack on Wednesday: ‘We may have our differences, but we do well in times like these to remember that everyone who serves in our nation’s capital is here because, above all, they love our country. We can all agree that we are blessed to be Americans, that our children deserve to grow up in a nation of safety and peace.’”

This unadulterated cant was published the same day the *Times* reported that Trump is now the target of special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation into alleged ties to Russia.

The *Washington Post* denounced Hodgkinson as a “madman.” Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri called the attack “unspeakable evil,” while Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio said it was an act of “senseless violence.” On Wednesday afternoon, Bernie Sanders stated that he was “sickened by this despicable act” carried out by a former volunteer in his presidential campaign.

Dismissing Hodgkinson as deranged, let alone evil, is a facile and false explanation for Wednesday’s shooting. This is an event that requires a political explanation. While it is legitimate for Sanders to clearly reject the act, he made no attempt to explain why it may have happened. Rather, he merely poured scorn over this unfortunate man’s corpse.

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposes acts of violence directed against political figures and representatives of the state, not on shallow moral grounds, but on the basis of firm political principles. Long historical experience has shown that such acts do nothing to defend or advance the interests of the working class. Rather, they are counterproductive. They create confusion and provide an excuse for the buildup of the state’s repressive forces.

The fight against the capitalist system is not advanced by assassinating individual political representatives, but rather by raising political consciousness in the working class and mobilizing its political power in the fight for socialism.

In providing a political explanation of this political act, it is important to look at the background of the man who carried it out.

James Thomas Hodgkinson’s story contains elements of a social tragedy. His life odyssey provides an insight into life in America today, and how an apparently decent man could wind up carrying out such a violent act. Born in 1950 and known to his friends as “Tom,” he was raised in the small town of Belleville, Illinois, across the state line from St. Louis, Missouri.

Hodgkinson’s friends responded with shock to Wednesday’s news. Childhood friend Dale Walsh told the *Belleville News-Democrat* that Hodgkinson was “a fun-loving guy” who “never backed down” on his political convictions, which had become more pronounced in the last decade. “I want people to know that he wasn’t evil,” Walsh said. “I guess he was tired of the politics.”

He graduated from West Belleville High School in 1968, the same year he became eligible for the military draft and possible deployment to fight in the ongoing war in Vietnam. In the mid-1970s, he opened a small construction business, switching to home inspection in the 1990s. Like tens of millions of American men, Hodgkinson had his share of minor run-ins with the law.

His childhood friends point to his decision to take in foster children as a sign of his generous character. His foster daughters bore the indelible marks of the deepening social crisis of the 1990s and 2000s.

One committed suicide by self-immolation at the age of 17 in 1996. The other overdosed on heroin as a 25-year-old in 2015. The impoverished southern Illinois area—formerly home to tens of thousands of militant miners and an active socialist movement—is one of the hardest hit

epicenters of the heroin and opioid crisis. Belleville currently has a per capita income of just \$18,990.

In recent years, Hodgkinson lived with his wife in a small home off a dirt road outside of town. He had few neighbors, but he liked to garden and perform odd jobs around the house. His backyard looked out across a half-mile of empty cornfields to the northwest. He would sometimes take his guns into the woods and shoot at targets or trees, as is common in rural parts of the Midwest.

He developed an interest in history and politics. He was deeply opposed, above all else, to war and social inequality. He began writing letters to the local *Belleville News-Democrat* toward the end of the Bush administration. These provide insight into his political outlook.

On July 12, 2008, Hodgkinson wrote: “I believe that anyone who increases his wealth in time of war is a war profiteer, and as such should be brought up on such charges. I also believe this includes President Bush, Vice President Cheney, most of their cabinet, all the people of Halliburton and anyone in the oil business.”

Like millions of Americans, he was initially hopeful with the election of Barack Obama, but became disillusioned when the administration failed to raise taxes on the rich. “I don’t know why the Democrats don’t propose a specific change to the tax laws to get the ball rolling. Maybe they don’t care about the working man either,” he wrote in 2011. “It looks like the super-rich have bought their vote as well.”

Around this time, Hodgkinson began to regularly employ the term “working class” in his letters. “I don’t envy the rich,” he wrote. “I despise the way they have bought our politicians and twisted our laws to their benefit.”

He continued, “These guys are cheating everyone in this country while telling us all the time that they are broke, when it is the super-rich with all the money.”

The outbreak of the Occupy Wall Street movement aroused Hodgkinson’s enthusiasm. He wrote to the *Belleville News-Democrat*, “I love seeing the protesters in New York, Boston and other big cities get their voices heard. This should have happened sooner.”

Contrary to press reports that he was a Democrat, he began to identify himself as politically independent, and in 2012 wrote, “Long live Bernie Sanders.”

Hodgkinson’s support for Sanders’ 2016 election campaign has been well documented. “I will NEVER vote Hillary,” Hodgkinson wrote on Facebook, adding that “a nomination for Hillary equals a win for Trump.”

The election of Trump left him angry and embittered and became a destabilizing factor. His brother Michael told the *New York Times* that Hodgkinson left for Washington, D.C. roughly in March. He stayed there longer than expected. His brother said Hodgkinson recently called and “told his wife he would be returning home soon because he missed her and their dogs.”

He was a troubled man, motivated by the intersection of immense personal difficulties and disoriented political anger. NBC News reported that Hodgkinson slept on a mattress in the back of his van, where he kept the semi-automatic rifle used in the attack. He had evidently been watching the Republican baseball team practice for weeks. In the time he was in D.C., and in the days preceding the attack, the unfolding political events did not assuage his anger.

Many in the political establishment have expressed shock and disbelief over Wednesday's events. They have no right to be surprised. Such events are now a common feature of American life, with 372 mass shootings reported in 2016 alone.

The United States is dominated by violence and inequality, and yet the vast majority of the population has no way to express its social anger through the institutions of government, the courts, the trade unions, the corporate press or the political parties.

The political battles in Washington are utterly remote from the real concerns of masses of people. At a time when the Democratic Party expends all its political energy on an hysterical anti-Russian campaign aimed at bringing about a shift in Trump's foreign policy, what motivates popular anger in the working class is not lurid claims of a Russian conspiracy, but social inequality and war.

There are lessons to be drawn. Social anger is real and it is building. Millions of workers will be looking toward the development of *social* struggle—not individual terrorism—to address the many problems of personal and social life. The task of the International Committee of the Fourth International is to unify all of the disparate social struggles of workers and youth in a mass political struggle for the socialist reorganization of the world economy.