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The Orlando massacre and the 2016 US election

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As the staggering scale of Sunday’s massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida continues to sink in, it is impossible to ignore the fact that both major capitalist parties have lost no time in attempting to exploit this tragedy for the most reactionary purposes.

The blood of the victims has barely dried. Many questions remain about the precise confluence of religious, right-wing, homophobic and other motives that drove the shooter, Omar Mateen, who died in a hail of police gunfire. But this stopped neither the Democratic nor the Republican presumptive presidential candidate from rushing to deliver back-to-back speeches Monday arguing for an escalation of war abroad and repression at home.

Democrat Hillary Clinton declared the slaughter of 49 innocent people at the gay nightclub in Orlando an example of “the barbarity that we face from radical jihadists.” Republican Donald Trump told his supporters that the massacre was the product of “importing radical Islamic terrorism into the West through a failed immigration system.”

What information has emerged about the man who carried out the massacre has little in common with the rhetoric and prescriptions offered by the two candidates.

First of all, he was a New York-born citizen of the US, not an immigrant. Coworkers, family members and others have described him as harboring pathological hatred not only for gays, but also for African-Americans, whom he regularly referred to using the “N”-word, saying they all

should be killed. This kind of racism is the stock-in-trade not of ISIS or Al Qaeda, but rather of white supremacists within the US itself, the same elements who have been responsible for many homophobic attacks.

Associates have also described Mateen as mentally ill and emotionally unstable, characteristics that apply equally to virtually all those who have been involved in such atrocities. How could it be otherwise given the profoundly abnormal, antisocial and random character of these acts?

That in the midst of the mayhem he dialed 911 to declare his allegiance to ISIS is not taken seriously by even the FBI and police as an indication of actual contact with the Islamist militia. Moreover, late Monday reports surfaced that Mateen had himself regularly visited the Pulse night club, drinking heavily there, and had been active on the gay chat and dating app Jack'd.

The wider tragedy is that this type of atrocity happens in the US with terrible frequency. Mass shootings occur literally on more than a daily basis.

Given this reality, it is not possible to understand a tragedy like the Orlando massacre merely by examining the motives of the individual responsible. When a society produces a significant number of people suffering from traumatic mental problems who then go on to commit mass murder, this can only be an expression of something deeply diseased within the society itself.

Such incidents have grown in frequency in tandem with the endless wars the US has waged abroad since the first Gulf War of 1991, as well as the unprecedented growth of social inequality.

The bloodiest of these events was the April 1995 truck bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh, a deeply alienated Gulf War veteran who became involved with right-wing militia circles. That attack killed 168 people and wounded hundreds more.

Other massacres in the intervening years that stand out in terms of the death toll include:

- Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999, where two students killed 13 people and wounded 24.
- Virginia Tech in 2007, where a student killed 32 people and wounded 17 others before taking his own life.
- The American Civic Association in Binghamton, New York in 2009, where a 42-year-old Vietnamese immigrant killed 13 people and wounded four others before killing himself.
- Fort Hood, Texas, also in 2009, where Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, an Army psychiatrist, killed 13 people and wounded 30.
- Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where in 2012 Adam Lanza killed 26 people—most of them young children—before killing himself.

- The Washington Navy Yard in 2013, where a former Navy reservist killed 12 people before police shot him dead.
- The June 2015 Charleston, South Carolina church massacre, in which a 21-year-old white gunman killed nine African-Americans at a prayer service, saying afterwards he had hoped to ignite a race war.
- The Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California, where, in December 2015, Syed Farook, 28, and Tashfeen Malik, 27, killed 14 people before losing their own lives in a shootout with police.

Smaller incidents in which three, four or five people are killed go largely unnoticed.

Neither the politicians nor the media care to examine the social roots of this endless round of mass slaughter.

The cynical and dishonest speeches given by Clinton and Trump Monday sought not to enlighten the public as to the real nature of this problem, but rather to pollute the political environment and lower the consciousness of the American people. In essence, despite mutual denunciations, there was little difference between them.

Both speeches were designed to exploit the tragedy suffered by the innocent individuals who lost their lives, along with their families and friends, in order to legitimize a preexisting reactionary agenda. Both candidates called for “ramping up” US military interventions and bombings in the Middle East, as if the war-ravaged people of the region are responsible for the attack on an Orlando nightclub. The transparent aim is to exploit the tragedy in Orlando in an attempt to erode the antiwar sentiments of the American people so as to further not only escalation in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, but also war threats against Russia and China.

Clinton spoke of acting to “harden our own defenses” within the US itself, by which she means an intensification of attacks on democratic rights and the utilization of police-state methods.

For his part, Trump delivered a fascist rant in which he repeated his proposal for a ban on Muslims entering the country and his rabid anti-immigrant chauvinism, demagogically linking immigrants not only to terrorism but also to falling wages and decaying infrastructure. He charged that Muslims as a whole in the US “know what’s going on” in relation to planned attacks and would have to either “cooperate” or face “big consequences.”

Both candidates cynically posed as the best friend of the gay community in a transparent bid to corral a new constituency behind their reactionary proposals.

It was Clinton, however, who delivered the most telling—and chilling—line, invoking the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and declaring in conclusion that it was “time to get back to the spirit of those days, spirit of 9/12.”

It was in the “spirit of 9/12” that Washington launched, based on lies, the illegal war of aggression against Iraq. It was in this same “spirit” that it passed the Patriot Act, opened the

prison camp at Guantanamo, set up a network of “black site” torture centers around the world, and arrogated to the president the right to indefinitely detain anyone, including US citizens, without charges or trials. Clinton supported all of these measures and now wants to cash in on the 49 deaths in Orlando to retroactively justify her own political crimes that led to the killing, wounding and displacement of millions.

To the extent that Clinton asserts as fact a direct link between the Orlando gunman and ISIS “genocide” in the Middle East—a claim that is highly questionable—it is necessary to point out her own role in the emergence of ISIS out of the social devastation and fomenting of sectarian conflict at the hands of American imperialism, with her active and enthusiastic support, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria.

American workers and youth must take the bipartisan reaction to the terrible events in Orlando as a serious warning of what is being prepared, no matter which party wins the November election.