

Like Our Lives Depend On It

April 1, 2018



Teenagers in this country are under constant attack.

Whether it is their taste in music, fashion, or, it seems, simply wanting to attend classes without the fear of meeting their sudden death in a hail of bullets, there are always commentators who are willing to wag their fingers in disapproval. The demands placed on kids, when you think about it, are outrageous.

Yet here we are, watching these teenagers lead a movement to end school shootings in our time. It is a cause that they should never have had to fight in the first place, but it is a fight that this group of kids seem determined to finish. It is incredible to watch, and within the context of the other radical actions being taken by teachers in West Virginia and Oklahoma; graduate students in Illinois, Toronto, and the United Kingdom; and a working class that also seems to be finding its voice, we could be witnessing a new era in agitation for social, political, and economic change.

All that said, however, the wheels started coming off a bit today.

Given control over the *Guardian US* for the day, the editorial staff of the *Stoneman Douglas Eagle Eye* published a manifesto of their demands for what should happen in the wake of the massacre at their school. One of the proposals is good and necessary, most of them are acceptable as harm reduction, and two of them are absolutely awful and a threat to marginalized folks. Regrettably, they also are silent on several salient issues raised the mass murders perpetrated by Nikolas Cruz and others that need to be addressed.

The best suggestion of the manifesto is the proposal to fund more research and care for mental health in this country. Stating that “[s]chools specifically should receive more funds in order to hire more psychologists and guidance counselors who can aid students suffering from PTSD, depression and other debilitating mental illnesses,” this has the potential to be transformative, especially in communities of color most afflicted by violence. This has become so vital that communities in the Chicago area are funding their own mental health services.

Unfortunately, this demand came after probably the worst suggestion in the document: a call to weaken patient confidentiality for those under treatment for mental health. They wrote:

As seen in the tragedy at our school, poor communication between mental healthcare providers and law enforcement may have contributed to a disturbed person with murderous tendencies and intentions entering a school and gunning down 17 people in cold blood.

We must improve this channel of communication. To do so, privacy laws should be amended. That will allow us to prevent people who are a danger to themselves or to others from purchasing

firearms. That could help prevent tragedies such as the Parkland massacre.

They could not be any more wrong about this. This notion is specifically rebutted by mental health professionals all over the place. Further, there is absolutely no indication that the murderer who attacked their school would have been prevented from purchasing a weapon given the fact that he refused further mental health treatment from the school in 2016. In fact, people with mental illness are more likely to be the victims of violence than they are the perpetrators. The only thing that giving police carte blanche access to people's mental health information would do is undermine medical professionals' ability to treat their patients and create what amounts to a registry of mentally ill folks across the country.

Given the increasingly fascist nature of the current American government, is that something you really want to give the ghouls running things?

The other proposal is more conventional if just as galling: spending more money on school security, specifically hiring more school resource officers. Writing, "We believe that schools should be given sufficient funds for school security and resource officers to protect and secure the entire campus," they go on to state that the one school resource officer they had hesitated because he lacked backup and it cost lives. Given that at least three deputies were present while the shooting was still ongoing, it's questionable as to whether throwing more cops at the problem would have stopped this murderer.

What's more, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund produced this brief as part of a coalition in 2013 in the wake of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary about hiring more police to defend schools nationwide. Unsurprisingly, the brief concludes that more police is no answer to this problem. Given that schools already inequitably punish Black and brown students more than white ones, the only thing that more school resource officers will do is reinforce the school to prison pipeline.

The rest of what they propose is essentially standard liberal public policy around gun control, which is adequate as harm reduction but nothing else. Things like raising the minimum age to purchase firearms to 21, banning certain types of weapons, and universal background checks are all sound suggestions for harm reduction, but they do not fundamentally address the violent foundations our society is built upon.

One aspect of this was on display when the perpetrator of the Stoneman Douglas massacre was arrested, as he was wearing the shirt of his JROTC team during the massacre, and he was on a JROTC marksmanship team funded by grants from the National Rifle Association. Given that JROTC is a military indoctrination program for children and potentially against international law, and given that a third of all mass shootings from 1984 to 2016 were perpetrated by military veterans while making up no more than 13% of the population during that time period, it seems obvious that the harm inflicted by this country's imperial activities overseas inevitably rebound home. This did not get addressed in this manifesto.

Another thing that the Eagle Eye's editors did not broach is the issue of intimate partner violence. The most common denominator between all of these massacres is the perpetrator was an abuser, including this one. While you could argue that expanding background checks would serve to catch these murderers, it ignores the number of abusers who never face criminal sanction for their actions. This oversight is even more baffling given that there are existing legal approaches to reduce the risk of gun violence from domestic abusers.

While convincing the *Guardian US* to present these bitter pills to their mostly liberal and middle

class readership would not have been easy, there was no better moment than now to force these painfully hard discussions out into the open. That this was not done can only be seen as a lost opportunity.

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Given the issues with the solutions outlined in the Guardian piece, socialists and other allied community organizers would be absolutely correct in calling these proposed policies what they are: tools that would be used by a state that is steeped in reaction and repression to further oppress marginalized communities. We can all laugh at a buffoon like Dinesh D’Souza for his abominable stance towards the Parkland students, but it should be known that there are likely hundreds just like him at institutions such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, Tobacco, and Explosives or in police departments nationwide who would love nothing more than a carte blanche to run into the East Side of Detroit or the South Side of Chicago and start kicking in doors.

As the murder of Stephon Clark at the hands of Sacramento Police shows, such a license is one that could end up deadly for people of color.

Another worrying trend comes out of the March For Our Lives in Greensboro, North Carolina. There, the local branch of the North Carolina Piedmont chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) sought to table at the event alongside the myriad other groups who would be at such an event and had gotten permission to do so. Late on Friday night, however, they received an email from the organizers of the Greensboro march informing them that they would not be allowed to table at the event. This was due to the “advice” of “legal partners”, who also advised that the Greensboro chapter of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) should be prevented from tabling at the event as well.

It is unknown who specifically advised the local March For Our Lives organizers to rescind DSA and ISO’s permission to table, but if the national-level coordination is any indication, it is a group like the Los Angeles-based public relations firm 42West, which has been handling PR for the march nationwide. While NC Piedmont DSA and Greensboro ISO both proudly participated in the march, the fact that organizations who were in early and frequent contact with the Movement For Our Lives organizers in Greensboro — ISO especially — were not allowed to table and hand out their literature shows that this nascent movement is in danger of being steered towards a dead-end liberalism that will do little to fix the problem of gun violence.

If such steering were to be successful, it would repeat the errors of 2006, where the Democrats very adroitly stole energy from the anti-war movement to win the midterm elections. And with big-money organizations, like Moms Demand Action and Everytown USA that are bankrolled by the billionaire former Mayor of New York City Mike Bloomberg, helping to steer this conversation towards a carceral vision of gun control, it is entirely possible that history will repeat itself and a vibrant protest movement will get shunted into a political blind alley only to be betrayed at the first opportunity.

The Democratic Party would like nothing more than for this to remain a moment, an outrage that lasts just long enough to help deliver it gains in this November’s election. But if the lessons of the labor movement’s engagement with the Democratic Party can bear any lessons at all for these organizers, it should be that campaign rhetoric dies a hard and lonely death once the bright lights of the horse race have dimmed.

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When all of this is considered, the impulse amongst leftists to see moves like this and dismiss the movement out of hand will be strong. We know where this road leads, and it is nowhere good.

But for this, the stakes are high. They are high because of the wide reach of gun violence, and the potential for solutions to this problem to actually exacerbate the issue. Gun violence that comes from a policeman's bullet rather than a bullied — or bigoted — high schooler still leaves families with loved ones to bury and communities to mourn. The only thing separating Darren Wilson and Jeronimo Yanez from Nikolas Cruz and George Zimmerman are uniforms and geography.

The approach from socialists and their comrades in community struggle, then, must be different.

Remember who we are talking about.

This moment sprung from a former classmate walking into their high school and killing 17 of their friends, and wounding 17 others. The students who were shot and survived face the possibility of a long and arduous physical recovery, and that is to say nothing of the psychological toll that such an event has on every survivor, as detailed in this harrowing 2015 article in the *Washington Post*.

We are not only talking about kids, but kids who have been through a trauma that most of us will never experience. Through all of that, they are working to build a movement because the aforementioned Adults In The Room have been derelict in their responsibilities to keep these kids safe.

Organizers use many tools in their work. One of those tools is empathy. We should, without question, demand that the policies advocated by this movement be holistic and understanding of the role that a racist and reactionary state plays in gun violence domestically and overall violence abroad. It is possible to do this, however, while keeping in mind that discussions on these topics are generally circumscribed by local school boards and constrained by curriculums handed down from the same state governments that have been increasingly dominated by the far right since 2010.

We live in a society whose ideas are reactionary at best, and it takes time and struggle for people to unlearn them. Most of us adults did not come to leftist politics until long after we left high school, and we still make many mistakes even now. Have some patience with them.

Let the youth lead on this one.

Every socialist organization either has a youth branch — the Young Democratic Socialists (YDSA) for DSA or Socialist Students for Socialist Alternative — or a dedicated cadre of young people who emerge from leftist formations on college campuses. These are the folks who should be leading the conversations with their peers on how to make this moment into a movement, and one with transformative potential.

This is part of why Bryan wrote this guide that was republished and distributed to every YDSA chapter. These students do not need to be condescended to, but they do need guidance and mentorship. If you have not been brought up in a political household, organizing is not something you have much experience with. This means engagement, and it means fair-minded criticism.

This is something that has already borne fruit, as some of the student leaders from Parkland sat down with their peers from the South Side of Chicago after the media's coverage of the Stoneman Douglas massacre was compared to its wholesale neglect (or luridly exploitative coverage) of gun violence in communities of color. As Mariame Kaba has been saying since February 14, "What resources have you developed? How are you offering these resources to newly engaged and emerging leaders? What opportunities for one on one engagement are you offering in your

communities right now?"

This movement is growing beyond the initial organizers.

With hundreds of thousands of people in the streets nationwide and no formal organization aside from some general talking points and imagery provided to those electing to take action under the March For Our Lives banner, it is abundantly clear that this movement is growing beyond any kind of meaningful control of the people it started with if it hasn't done so already. This is not to say that what these young people are saying is unimportant, but as with Black Lives Matter the movement has grown well beyond any kind of effective direction from its originators.

This does not mean these leaders are irrelevant, nor does it mean that they should be immunized from criticism. That three Parkland survivors spoke in Tel Aviv without discussing the brutal and ongoing violence of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, especially from state-sanctioned private colonists, is something that needs to be noted and criticized.

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In gun culture parlance, "printing" occurs when the outline of a concealed handgun appears through the clothes the person carrying concealed wears. It is a moment where the potential for violence bleeds through the careful and frequently expensive efforts to hide it. This frequently happens when the weapon being carried is too big for the clothes being worn or the holster it is placed in.

American life is filled with violence, but most of us tune it out. When we read about the police violence that wreaks havoc in urban communities, we dismiss it as being something that comes part-and-parcel with urban life since Black life is cheap. When the news details the devastation from the bombs being dropped by American and Saudi planes in Syria and Yemen, we are complacent as it is something that is happening Over There™ and not in our own communities. Even when we bear witness to extreme acts of hatred here at home, most typified by the 2015 Mother Emanuel AME massacre that claimed the lives of nine Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina, our commentariat are quick to reassure us that this isn't in any way in keeping with the American Values™ have been put place since the Founding Of Our Republic™.

But it is in moments such as this one, or the massacres at Columbine, or Virginia Tech, or the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, or Sutherland Springs in Texas, or Las Vegas that the violent roots of the American experiment we have been all too willing to ignore begins to print upon our collective psyche. The massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School is one more instance where the outline sharpens a bit more, and the obvious becomes a bit more so to a few more people.

What the students of Parkland — in coalition with the students and victims of American violence both here and abroad — are attempting to do is nothing less than the cutting back of the bloody roots of the American project. That is a tall ask of kids who should be preparing for college, going to their proms or ring dances, and gearing up for another summer lost to the laughter and love that characterizes what it means to be young.

It is inevitable that mistakes will be made given the nature of this undertaking. Much as we have learned through them, these young activists and leaders need to learn themselves, and we should be open with our knowledge and our hearts.

The lives of so many depend on it.

Originally posted at The South Lawn.