

Socialists Need an Independent Approach to Gun Violence

Danny Katch : 14-17 minutes : 9/26/2022

Among the many grim features of U.S. life in 2022, gun violence might be especially depressing because it is a crisis that seems so solvable and yet hopeless at the same time.

We are trapped in a national gun debate between a rabidly political right wing and a stubbornly apolitical center, with the left nowhere in sight. On one side are demagogues in the National Rifle Association (NRA) and Republican Party who whip up fears of Black and Brown “criminals,” threatened masculinity and postindustrial decline. On the other side are organizations increasingly shaped by the narrow and technocratic solutions put forward by the organizations funded by Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire former New York City mayor.

As a result, the most horrific mass shootings, like those earlier in this year in Buffalo and Uvalde, are inevitably followed by an anguished but largely inane debate, with some saying “*if only the shooter didn’t have a gun,*” and others saying “*if only everybody had a gun.*”

The hostility between the two sides masks similarities in their worldviews. In June, [the Supreme Court ruled that New York State’s](#) tight restrictions on “open carry” gun permits violated citizens’ Second Amendment right to self-defense. Among the many leading Democrats expressing outrage was New York City Mayor Eric Adams, who three months earlier had [reestablished a special police unit](#) with a history of excessive violence as part of an effort to crack down on illegal guns. The Republican-dominated Court and the Democratic mayor see themselves on opposite sides of the gun issue, but both want to put more people with guns on the street as a way to “reduce” violence.

When, a week after the 2012 Newtown school shooting, [NRA president Wayne LaPierre](#) declared, “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” liberals were justifiably horrified. But few were willing and able to see that this disastrously violent mindset is also the core idea of modern law enforcement, and a driving force of U.S. history since the founding days of slave patrols and genocidal violence against Indigenous people.

Establishing Common Ground on Guns Among the Left

The socialist left in the U.S. has greatly impacted debates on health care, climate change and mass incarceration in recent years, but we’ve been largely silent on gun politics, unsure how to approach an issue with no clear solutions. We’re appalled by gun violence — whose primary victims are poor people of color, abused women and people with mental illness — but reject the brutal criminal legal system as a solution to violence. We support people’s right to armed self-defense — especially those who have the most reason to mistrust law enforcement — but see how the right uses self-defense rhetoric to advance “Stand Your Ground” legal doctrines that increase impunity of vigilantes and white nationalist militias.

Socialists, feminists, abolitionists and anti-imperialists need more public discussions about whether we can come to some common positions about guns, gun violence and gun laws. I hope to lay out a useful framework for this process, starting with two core ideas.

One: However gun rights are interpreted, they must be granted equally, something that has never been true in the U.S. The U.S. has a long history of both widespread access to guns for some and strict gun control for others. The Second Amendment enshrined the rights of white male citizens to be armed for the purpose of keeping arms out of the hands of Indigenous peoples and enslaved (and free) African Americans. Today, gun laws are written and selectively enforced to allow for both a gun-celebrating culture in much of the country and a police-state approach to gun possession among poor Black and Brown people. As a result, those who most need the right to armed self-defense are most likely to have it denied. Socialists have to fight for gun laws, whether they are strict or lax, to be applied equally.

Two: Guns have generally been a more effective tool for reactionary forces operating in alliance with police and corporations than for the forces trying to fight them. Armed self-defense is an important right to be defended, but that is only a small part of what is required to make positive political change. For the left, our most powerful tool is collective struggle (occasionally armed but usually not). Those in power know this, and it's no coincidence that most states that have seen an increase in "gun rights" have also seen a decrease in our right to protest. Socialists need to intervene in gun politics in a way that highlights and projects strength through building community and solidarity.

Based on these two premises, I propose four broad principles that could form the basis of an independent socialist approach to some of the many facets of gun violence and U.S. gun culture.

Universal Gun Safety Measures, Not Profiling for “Good Guys” and “Bad Guys”

By far the most popular gun reforms are about expanding the use of the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). Given how frequently background checks are mentioned in the media, it's remarkable how few people know what the NICS checks for. While a few criteria, such as domestic violence and stalking, relate to behaviors directly tied to higher rates of violence, the majority of criteria do not. These categories — which include drug use, immigration status, felony convictions (which include a wide range of categories), and something called “mental defectives” — are more about stereotyping than violence prevention.

It isn't politically easy for socialists to oppose background checks at a time when people are understandably demanding that elected officials “do something” to stop mass shootings and (to a lesser extent) other forms of gun violence. But the entire premise of screenable categories of “good guys” and “bad guys” is misguided. Many mass shooters pass (or would be eligible to pass) the NICS, while many police officers — who enjoy exemptions from almost all gun restrictions — have far greater rates of both [domestic violence](#) and [suicide](#) than the general population.

Then there are the troubling politics of background checks. After this summer's passage of a bipartisan gun reform bill that increased background checks, Republican leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) declared, “The legislation before us would make our communities and schools safer without laying one finger on the Second Amendment for law-abiding citizens.” We should be wary of cheering on any precedents that the current Supreme Court can use to declare that constitutional rights only apply to certain “law-abiding” segments of the population.

There's an alternative approach to profiling and scapegoating. The left needs to support universal gun safety measures that recognize that any of us are capable, under the wrong circumstances, of committing violence. Such measures could possibly include:

- Universal public health and safety measures such as raising the age of gun ownership, waiting periods for all gun purchases, and safe storage laws.
- A licensing system for gun ownership based on the automobile model, administered by public health agencies, not police departments.
- Restricting the criteria for any background checks to past actions statistically linked to higher rates of gun violence, such as domestic violence.

Democratic Power Over Gun Institutions, Not Police Power Over People

Authoritarian approaches to public safety, shared by both sides of the current gun debate, call for arming and empowering “heroic protectors” — and demanding that the rest of us obey them. But these supposed heroes, whether they be cops or armed civilians, rarely prevent shootings. On the other hand, they certainly cause them: An astonishing [one-third of all “stranger homicides”](#) are committed by police officers.

In contrast, democratic solutions look to the potential strength of communities to reduce sources of potential violence, from long-term efforts to reduce poverty and heal trauma to more immediate work in de-escalating conflicts. Building democracy also means taking on the absurd privileges and powers that have been granted to this country’s two primary gun institutions: law enforcement and the gun industry. Here are some suggestions:

- Repeal the [Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act](#), which grants unique legal immunity to firearms corporations.
- Repeal the Law Enforcement Officers Safety Act, which enables current and retired cops to carry a concealed weapon anywhere in the country regardless of local laws.
- End the *gunocracy*’s public health gag order by reversing the [Dickey Amendment](#), which has blocked federal funding for research projects looking into gun violence.
- End the myriad local practices that allow police officers to bring their service weapons home, despite their higher rates of domestic violence and suicide.

Changing Gun Laws Only Works as Part of a Movement to Change Gun Culture

After background checks, the most publicized demand of the gun control movement is a ban on “assault weapons.” While some find it self-evident that troubled youth shouldn’t be able to get their hands on military-style weapons, the details of how such a ban would work — [and even what an “assault weapon” is](#) — are quite complicated.

Setting aside these important logistical questions, we should be clear that, in the absence of a major shift in cultural attitudes, any ban on firearms, gun modifications or ammunition will not lead to fewer guns and less violence. Without such a cultural shift, before the ban took effect, there would almost certainly be a massive surge in purchases, and afterward, there’s a strong likelihood that a vibrant and possibly dangerous illegal trade would develop. That’s because, like it or not, there is a massive demand for guns in the U.S., and history shows that prohibitions against goods with a strong demand generally do not work — especially when those laws are seen as illegitimate among wide swaths of the populace.

Advocates of gun bans often point to the example of Australia, where sweeping gun reforms in 1996 — including a mandatory government buyback of semiautomatic weapons — led to a

major reduction in gun deaths over the ensuing decade. But when it comes to gun culture, there is simply no comparing Australia — which at the time had a firearms ownership rate of under [7 percent](#) — with the United States, where ownership rates have always been at least five times as high.

None of this is to say that socialists should oppose any attempt to regulate the kinds of weaponry that are legally sold. But it does mean we should be clear that efforts to restrict access to certain types of weapons and ammo have to be accompanied by cultural changes of the type that have seen significant declines in harmful behaviors like [drunk driving](#), [bullying](#) and [cigarette smoking](#) in recent decades.

We need to greatly increase public awareness of the realities of gun violence, especially in its most common forms of suicide and domestic violence — neither of which fit popular images of guns as a heroic tool of self-defense. To do so will require a social movement that looks very different from the gun control lobby.

A Movement Against Gun Violence Must Be Led by Those Most Affected by It

In communities across the country there are domestic violence survivors, mental health advocates and community leaders in areas of high violence who have been working for decades to reduce gun violence. But all too often, their insights and experiences have been either ignored or barely factored into the politics of the gun control movement, especially in the decade since Michael Bloomberg's philanthropic empire has come to dominate the discussion.

[As Micah Sifry has documented](#), Bloomberg's Everytown for Gun Safety Action Fund has used the power of its funding to co-opt more grassroots groups, steering them from protest to press conferences and narrowing the movement's aims to background checks, which match's Bloomberg's longtime political vision of "better" government via policing and data collection.

Because gun violence is so deeply connected with the structural inequalities of racial capitalism that Bloomberg would rather ignore, many victims of gun violence are also likely to be victims of the U.S. criminal legal and immigration systems — with felonies or deportation orders that make them "bad guys" in the eyes of the NICS. Perhaps, [as Gary Younge argued](#) a few years ago, this is one reason why the gun control movement seems to have so little to do with most victims of gun violence (mass shootings excepted).

In the months after the horrific Parkland school shooting in 2018, the youth movement that built March for Our Lives offered an inspiring vision of what a movement against gun violence led by the most impacted could look like. Speakers like [Edna Chavez](#) from Los Angeles and [Trevon Bosley](#) from Chicago, each of whom had lost a brother to a street shooting, connected gun violence to mass policing and the disinvestment from Black and Brown communities.

It was a glimpse of a different kind of movement against gun violence. We should imagine what it could look like to keep building in this direction, and include organizers from domestic violence shelters, cop-watch teams and migrants who have directly experienced the impact of guns in the hands of U.S. soldiers.

I've made this my final point, but self-determination is the first principle of any political struggle. I don't know what a national movement led by working-class survivors of gun violence would look like; perhaps it would reject most of my framework and proposals. But for now, the left can

present some alternatives to the miserable gun debate that can expand on these very different frameworks that are too often ignored.

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