

Finland: What are the social roots of school gunman's murderous rage?

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In 20 minutes, just before midday on November 7, 18-year-old Pekka-Eric Auvinen shot dead six fellow students, his head teacher and a nurse at Jokela High School in Finland. He then tried to set fire to the school, before shooting and fatally injuring himself. He had over 200 more bullets available. A further 11 students were injured by flying glass.

There appears to have been no warning of the massacre in preparation. Some school colleagues noted that Auvinen had been behaving strangely, yet others said he appeared cheerful enough and was always smiling. He comes from an apparently stable family, one of two brothers born to a railway worker and jazz musician father, and a local Green politician mother. His teachers described Auvinen as an above average student with an interest in history and left and right political movements.

Jokela is a small town in the Tuusula commune area of southern Finland, 30 miles or so north of the capital Helsinki. It was founded around a brickworks in the late 19th century. Its population is still only 6,000, many of whom commute the half hour to Helsinki by train or car, preferring the lower commuter belt house prices.

The small high school, responsible for some 450 pupils, is not a prestigious establishment, but neither does it look impoverished. Shots of the building's interior, seen through bullet holes, show a fairly well-equipped facility, although not a Columbine High School, or Johann Gutenberg Gymnasium, scenes of previous school massacres in 1999 and 2002, in the United States and Germany.

The town is part of the Tuusula area, a tourist attraction advertising rural cultural walks past the former residences of Finnish cultural figures, such as composer Jean Sibelius.

More pertinently, Jokela is also close to the town of Vantaa, in the adjoining commune of Myyrmäki, a suburb of Helsinki. In 2002, 19-year-old Petri Erkki Tapio Gerdt blew up himself and six passersby in a Vantaa shopping mall.

Gerdt's actions were clearly those of someone in deep crisis, despairing and possibly mentally ill. He left very little by way of clues as to the trigger for his suicidal outrage. The *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time the shortage of child psychiatric support available in Finland, along with high stress levels on young people, in a culture with an already high suicide rate. Gerdt left a few lines in an Internet chat room. He was due to face a mathematics exam in the next days, which might have had important consequences for his future career. He had no apparent political affiliations, or known social or political views.

Auvinen was more voluble and prolific. There are reports that he had been bullied at school, had recently split up with his online girlfriend and that he had been on antidepressants for a year, although

his former girlfriend, 18-year-old Tana Scheel, rejected some of these claims. "He was" she said "not a psychopath or a sociopath. He felt love, he felt guilt, he felt fear," but "he was not bullied or picked on." He was, however, battling against mental illness, she said. His mental and spiritual crisis appears to have been conditioned by his profoundly despairing assessment of the state of the world. Like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who carried out the massacre at Columbine High School, Auvinen saw himself as a rebel, isolated and violently at odds with most of the world. He announced his arrival at Jokela High School November 7 with the words "this is the revolution."

But Auvinen was a radical right-winger, described himself as a "Social Darwinist" and admired the Columbine killers, eugenics and Adolf Hitler.

Social Darwinism, which first emerged in the late 19th century, contended that Charles Darwin's discovery of the laws of evolution through "survival of the fittest" should be applied to society to explain rule by a narrow and wealthy oligarchy. It has re-emerged recently in right-wing and religious circles, particularly in the United States, as an ideological justification for the destruction of social welfare worldwide, and consequent accelerating levels of inequality. For social Darwinists, ordinary people are just stupid and the rich and powerful have risen to the top because of their natural superiority.

In the last months of his young life, Auvinen had taken to posting video clips on YouTube under the name "NaturalSelector89." His right-wing rants were alarming enough to encourage a number of YouTube users to demand their removal, which the company did. One user flagged him as a potential "school shooter." Others recommended he get help.

Having been banned from YouTube, he opened a new account, under the user name "Sturmgeist89" and continued posting. His channel had around 300 subscribers—other YouTube users who receive an email notification when a new video is posted. Topics covered appear to have included Columbine, Waco, the bombing of Baghdad, all stamped with the words "Die."

Auvinen appears to have become increasingly unstable. One video, which was copied by another user and then reposted, gives an indication of someone coming apart—though with a degree of self-awareness.

In a clip with a tortured soundtrack, lyrics opening with "there is no place for me in the land I love" and red text fading in and out, Auvinen warned, "The combination of my own violent beliefs mixed with my past is a very deadly mix." "I'm still waiting for someone to save me ... maybe I will find peace and live my own life."

His last video clip warned of an attack on Jokela High School.

In his final statement, "Natural Selector's Manifesto," Auvinen

outlined a demented mixture of existentialist phrasing, violent misanthropy, combined with an all-consuming distrust and hatred for contemporary society.

He listed “What do I hate/What I don’t like?” These included “equality, tolerance, human rights, political correctness, hypocrisy, enslaving religions and ideologies, antidepressants, TV soap operas & drama shows...”

He liked “existentialism, self-awareness, freedom, justice, truth, moral & political philosophy, personal and social psychology, evolution science, political incorrectness, guns, shooting...”

His “Natural Selector’s Manifesto” claimed that natural selection had been reversed.

The “stupid, weak-minded people are reproducing faster than the intelligent, strong minded people,” he said.

Auvinen appointed himself to begin to reverse this in the name of “naturalness.” “Not all human lives are important or worth saving.” Society should be ruled by free minds that are “capable of intelligent existential and philosophical thinking...” These were the top 3 percent, the rest were “normal people,” “robots” or “vegetables.”

Before his murderous attack, he had played Battlefield 2, his favourite first-person shooter game in which you can assume the role of US or coalition troops in the Middle East, insurgents or Chinese troops. After accumulating 183 hours of play, Auvinen had achieved 9,475 “kills” and 234 “suicides.”

He concluded, “Don’t blame anyone else for my actions than myself, Don’t blame my parents or my friends.... It’s time to put NATURAL SELECTION & SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST back on tracks!” (emphasis in original).

Whereupon he went to school to kill himself and those around him.

Auvinen also appears to have been in contact, via his subscriber list, with Dillon Cossey, a youth arrested in Philadelphia for allegedly planning a shooting.

This week it also emerged that the German police, acting on information received from Finland, arrested two youths in Cologne who had stockpiled weaponry, apparently intending to attack their school on the anniversary of another shooting in Emsdetten, Germany last year. One of the Cologne youths later threw himself under a train. Another school pupil was arrested in Norway following similar threats made to Erdal junior high school. Metal detectors have subsequently been introduced.

Equality, human rights are all worthless. The majority are stupid. The top 3 percent shall inherit the earth. Those who stand in their way should be eliminated. Is this not a crude rendition of the social and military policy followed by the major powers?

What of Finland itself?

Finland has been proclaimed as the most competitive country in the world four times since 2002, while also being held up as one of the Nordic models of socially just capitalism. But what really is gestating under the surface?

Although Auvinen appears to have made no comment about contemporary Finnish society, the relationship between the deepening class tensions there and across Europe over the period of Auvinen’s Internet campaign and preparations for mass murder demands consideration.

Acute political and social tensions have developed in Europe, manifested in the mass strike movement in France, the train drivers’ dispute in Germany and the postal dispute in Britain.

Finland is no exception to this picture. Particularly since the election of a right-wing government earlier this year, Finland has seen a series

of strikes by different sections of workers seeking to defend their living standards. Foremost on the agenda of the coalition government of the Centre Party, the Conservatives, the National Coalition Party, the Greens and the Swedish Party (Finland has a Swedish minority), has been the break-up of national bargaining arrangements, in place for decades.

In late October, 3,000 technical workers in the engineering industry struck in pursuit of an 8.5 percent pay claim. The strike, which was settled after the intervention of Juhani Salenius, the national conciliator, was about to spread to workers in a number of larger corporations, including Nokia, the world’s leading mobile phone producer. Some 40,000 workers in shipping, forestry, postal services and the steel industry were also, as of early October, threatening or had already launched industrial action.

The most determined action was initiated by 12,800 specialist nurses in the Union of Health and Social Care Professionals (Tehy). The nurses—some of whom have been forced to work double shifts in order to make ends meet—demanded a 15 percent pay increase on top of the 9 percent previously agreed with local authority workers, and threatened to resign en masse unless this was met.

The threat took union leaders by surprise and caused a crisis for the coalition. In a late-night sitting on November 13, the government passed “patient protection” legislation to fine large numbers of key workers who refused to work. But the nurses, who enjoyed high levels of public support, refused to be intimidated. On November 19, the government and employers appear to have conceded most of nurses’ immediate demands, with wage increases agreed of 22 to 28 percent over four years.

Further strikes are planned, with pharmacists demanding a €500 euro/17 percent pay increase. Workers at the state alcohol monopoly, Alko, also intend to strike from December 1.

Small wonder, then, that political responses to the killings have been motivated by the need to whitewash Finnish society.

Prime Minister Vanhanen immediately moved to introduce gun control. Finland has the third highest level of gun ownership in the world, after the US and Yemen. Anyone over 15 years of age can buy a firearm. Auvinen himself had recently joined a Helsinki shooting club. Yet although there is a high murder rate, shootings with guns are relatively rare. Most gun users keep their weapons for hunting in a sparsely populated country.

Sakari Karjalainen, director general at the Ministry of Education, was markedly complacent. “We seriously think it is a very isolated incident, which could have happened anywhere, and in fact has already happened in Germany and the USA. Nothing implies that there is something seriously wrong with our school system or society generally.”

But if such incidents can happen anywhere—and they can—then the opposite is true. There is in fact “something seriously wrong” with society in Finland, just as there is elsewhere in the world.



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