

The socialist attitude to the tragedy of Luigi Mangione

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The case of Luigi Mangione, the 26-year old who allegedly assassinated United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson in the streets of Manhattan, has become a major public issue in the United States. While many details remain to be explained, the response from different layers of society raises fundamental class questions.

To begin with, the *World Socialist Web Site* denounces the vindictive prosecution of Mangione, who has been denied bail and is being charged with terrorism, raising the possibility of the death penalty. We demand that Mangione, who apparently suffers from severe health issues, be granted bail and receive the medical care that he needs.

The response of the corporate oligarchs and mainstream media, combining a vicious attitude towards Mangione personally with moral outrage over his alleged violence, is utterly hypocritical. Only a few days after the killing in Manhattan, the media was unanimous in its praise of the terrorist murder of Russian general Igor Kirillov in the streets of Moscow, an act which brings the world closer to the brink of nuclear war.

American capitalist society, in terminal crisis, “feeds on flesh and drinks blood,” to quote civil rights lawyer Clarence Darrow’s description of the hysteria during World War I. Hundreds of thousands have been killed in US-backed wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Syria and other countries. The new Trump administration is preparing political violence on a scale never seen before in American history.

Having said this, we totally oppose those who hold up Mangione as some sort of avenging hero. Any feeling of satisfaction, that Thompson “got what he deserved,” is a retrograde and even harmful response, personalizing what is ultimately a problem that can only be resolved on the basis of a social struggle by the working class.

The significant public support for what Mangione allegedly did expresses the deep-rooted tendency in American public life, itself promoted by the corporate media in opposition to class consciousness, to glorify individual action and extreme individualism.

More will come out about the motives behind the killing. However, one can never judge an act by subjective intentions, but rather by the perspective that guides it and on the impact it has. For the latter criteria, the killing of Thompson changes nothing except that the 50-year-old’s wife and two children have been deprived of a husband and father, and that Mangione himself faces

the prospect of a lengthy prison term and even a death sentence.

In the larger scheme of things, Thompson is a small fry to American capitalism, and he has already been quickly replaced. The apparent motive, and the sympathy which his killing has evoked, recalls a famous scene from the Depression-era novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, where a poor farmer, arguing with a bulldozer driver about to tear down his homestead, tries to figure whom to shoot in order to stop it:

[The driver:] “It’s not me. There’s nothing I can do. I’ll lose my job if I don’t do it. And look—suppose you kill me? They’ll just hang you, but long before you’re hung there will be another guy on the tractor, and he’ll bump the house down. You’re not killing the right guy.”

“That’s so,” the tenant said. “Who gave you orders? I’ll go after him. He’s the one to kill.”

“You’re wrong. He got his orders from the bank. The bank told them: ‘Clear those people out or it’s your job.’”

“Well, there’s a president of the bank. There’s a Board of Directors. I’ll fill up the magazine of the rifle and go into the bank.”

The driver said: “Fellow was telling me the bank gets orders from the East. The orders were: ‘Make the land show profit or we’ll close you up.’”

“But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don’t aim to starve to death before I kill the man that’s starving me.”

“I don’t know. Maybe there’s nobody to shoot. Maybe the thing isn’t man at all. Maybe, like you said, the property’s doing it.”

“I got to figure,” the tenant said. “We all got to figure. There’s some way to stop this. It’s not like lightning or earthquakes. We’ve got a bad thing made by men, and by God that’s something we can change.”

The basic task of our time is the expropriation of United Healthcare and other major corporations by the working class in a socialist revolution, not “vengeance” against individual executives. This requires the construction of a revolutionary party in the working class, capable of raising its level of class consciousness and organization to the level of this historic aim.

The recent and ongoing strikes by workers at Amazon, Boeing,

Canada Post and elsewhere are the tremors before a massive eruption of class struggle under the incoming Trump administration. The outcome will be determined by the degree to which this spontaneous upsurge becomes a conscious and international movement against capitalism, and the degree to which workers are able to organize themselves independently against the pro-management union bureaucrats.

Marxists oppose individual violence because it runs directly counter to the above outlook, as we explained in an earlier perspective, replacing the action of the *class* with the action of desperate, angry individuals, drawn primarily from the ranks of middle-class youth.

In contrast to this approach, wide sections of the pseudo-left are openly promoting Mangione. Typical was a headline in the newspaper of the Spartacist League, a middle-class radical group that split from Trotskyism more than 50 years ago, which declared: “Counterproductive but Not Criminal: Free Luigi!” In it, they promote the worst instincts of personal revenge and bloodlust, hailing Mangione’s “bold, decisive and courageous” action while evincing sympathy with the desire to “off a bloodsucking millionaire.” While it may be “bold and decisive,” there certainly is nothing courageous about shooting an unarmed man in the back.

Criticizing Mangione’s alleged actions only as “inexpedient,” they then declare categorically that the killing was “certainly no crime from the standpoint of the working class.”

In fact, it is from the standpoint of the interests of the working class that the killing was *most criminal*. Spartacist itself admits, “It’s possible that others will be inspired by the act and choose the same road—a waste of potentially revolutionary human material.” In this statement, they essentially accept responsibility for such a terrible tragedy. Rather than attempting to draw the necessary lessons and educate workers, Spartacist adapts to, and helps to amplify, political confusion.

Their support for Mangione recalls the promotion of the suicide of anti-genocide protester Aaron Bushnell earlier this year. Bushnell took his own life as a form of personal protest, while Mangione took another’s. But what they have in common is their utter political futility. The bourgeoisie will neither be moved by self-immolation nor by the killing of an executive.

Spartacist pays only lip service to the Marxist opposition to “terrorism,” declaring it a side issue. In fact, it is central, not least because it exposes Spartacist and others as unprincipled opportunists.

In contrast to the bourgeois usage of the term “terrorism” to demonize all forms of resistance, the Marxist usage of the term has always had the more specific meaning of substituting for the mobilization of the working class acts of violence against individual members of the ruling class. Marxists have always insisted that in spite of its appearance of “radicalism,” terrorism at its heart is an essentially reformist, even conservative perspective of “pressuring” the ruling class into making concessions.

No doubt many of those who support Mangione hope that his alleged action will frighten insurance companies into reducing premiums and expanding coverage. But the opposite has taken place. Corporate America is determined to make an example of Mangione while they prepare for sweeping dictatorship and open

oligarchic rule under Trump.

The political evolution of terrorist groupings has always followed a definite class logic. In the late 19th century, the founder of Russian Marxism Georgi Plekhanov opposed the Narodnik movement which attempted to fight the Tsar with assassinations as “liberals with bombs.” This characterization was proven decades later during the Russian Revolution, when their political heirs in the Socialist Revolutionary party opposed the October Revolution and joined with Tsarist officers against the Bolsheviks in the Civil War.

In more recent times, many former radicals from the 1960s who espoused bombings and guerilla tactics have found their way into high-ranking political and academic posts, including Bill Ayers of the Weather Underground and former Maoist turned Democratic Party hack Van Jones. In Germany, former street fighter Joschka Fischer became foreign minister in the late 1990s.

Spartacist and the pseudo-left fraternity to which it belongs are trying to divert a generation of radicalized youth into the dead-end perspective of reformist “pressure” which does not fundamentally threaten the status quo. In so doing, they have helped to create an environment of extreme frustration in which the killing of Thompson could have taken place.

The disruption of a mass movement has not only paved the way for the re-election of Trump. It also leaves vulnerable layers to seek a way out through personal “solutions.” This is particularly true among students and youth, a category which includes Mangione. Polls show roughly 60 percent of young people support his actions.

But now, doubling down after the evident failure of exerting “pressure” through protests, the pseudo-left now encourages “pressure” through self-destructive acts of vengeance.

All those who promote short-cuts and quick fixes, or divert attention from social to personal solutions, whatever they say about themselves, are politically disoriented and pessimistic. For youth seeking a way to oppose inequality, exploitation and war, we say: turn to the working class and build a revolutionary movement based on socialist principles! Not individual revenge, but only workers’ power can settle accounts with capitalism.



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