

This week in history: October 11-October 17

11 October 2010

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

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25 years ago: 80,000 Chrysler workers strike

On October 15, 1985, 80,000 Chrysler workers in the US and Canada went out on strike upon the expiration of the concessions contract put in place during the bailout of the number three North American auto maker. The strike began after Chrysler submitted new concession demands one day before the old contract's expiration. It was forced on the UAW bureaucracy by wildcat action by Chrysler workers in Detroit and St. Louis in the preceding weeks.

Chrysler workers demanded to recoup losses imposed on them through the bailout, which had been put in place by a Democratic President Jimmy Carter and a Democratic-controlled Congress, and the reestablishment of common contract expirations with Ford and General Motors workers.

It was the first and last strike uniting US and Canadian auto workers since the split, earlier in 1985, of the Canadian Auto Workers (at the time UAW Canada). The UAW and the CAW, however, negotiated separately, with the 10,000 or so Canadian workers returning to work earlier than their US counterparts.

The UAW and its president, Owen Bieber, ultimately pushed through approval of an agreement that included a one-off bonus and wage parity with GM and Ford. However, the deal included a three-year contract that would keep workers at Chrysler separated from those at GM and Ford in future negotiations. Significantly, the contract also established joint UAW-management "sourcing committees," bringing the union into direct collaboration with Chrysler for tearing up of work rules and job classifications.

The *Bulletin*, forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, called on workers to vote down the contract. The *Bulletin* warned that because the agreement separated Chrysler workers from others autoworkers in the US and Canada, the unions

would pursue a "bidding war for a dwindling number of jobs." The newspaper warned that the contract was characterized by its corporatism, the assertion of "the identity of interests of labor and management leading to unlimited collaboration ... to defend the profit system, no matter what the cost to the working class."

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50 years ago: Turkish military regime seeks death penalty for former PM, 500 others

The Turkish provisional government began the trial of major figures removed in the May 27 military coup, including President Celal Baylar and Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and more than 500 other members of the Democratic Party. It announced it would seek the death penalty for Menderes, Baylar, and a handful of others, and that there would be no appeals permitted.

The accused were to be tried for a spate of alleged offenses, including petty personal crimes. But the main charge—treason for violating the constitution—was hypocritical on its face, given that the defendants were themselves removed in an extra-legal military operation headed by General Cemal Gursel. The verdict was to be handed down by a National Unity Committee controlled by the military junta.

The coup and trial exposed the pretensions of democracy in Turkey, a critical US ally. Menderes had been democratically elected twice and was PM from 1950 until 1960. Others of the accused were sitting members of parliament. Visibly drawn at the trial, Menderes opened his remarks to the court by, in a broken voice, appealing for someone to speak to. He had been held in solitary confinement for over four months. The 76-year-old Bayar had attempted suicide a week earlier in prison.

The trial and eventual execution of Menderes demonstrated the military's distrust that civilian authority could maintain order in Turkey, a recurring feature of the nation's history in the 20th century.

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75 years ago: Craft and industrial unionism collide at AFL conference

Tensions within the American Federation of Labor (AFL) came to a head this week in 1935, as the union's "old guard" clashed with a minority faction calling for industrial unionism during the federation's convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

During the convention, the AFL came out against the formation of a labor party and voted to amend its constitution to ban suspected communists from attaining seats in leadership bodies. An earlier draft of the amendment was even harsher, seeking to bar anyone suspected of being a communist from membership in the AFL altogether.

But the convention was dominated by the question of industrial unionism—the organization of workers in an entire industry into one union, rather than myriad craft unions associated with particular skills in the production process. At one point, John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers (UMW) and leader of the pro-industrial-union minority, came to blows with William S. Hutcheson, president of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners.

Lewis and other advocates of industrial unionism were responding to the upsurge in militancy in the US working class the year before. From the floor of the convention, Lewis called the AFL's policy over the past quarter century "one of unbroken failure," and declared that the federation's decision on industrial unionism "will tell whether it will rest content with rendering service to but a paltry three to five million instead of forty million who want to be union men."

The majority report of the convention, supporting craft unionism, ultimately won 18,025 votes while the minority received 10,924 votes. Within a month, Lewis and supporters of industrial unionism within the AFL would formally split from the federation to form the Committee for Industrial Organization, later renamed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

French unions called off a crippling strike of railway workers on October 17, 1910, after Prime Minister Aristide Briand declared the strike a "revolt" and therefore subject to harsh state repression. Among other measures, Briand ordered a large military intervention, conscripted the striking railway workers into the army reserve, thus subjecting them to military discipline, and ordered the arrest of dozens of strike leaders and socialists.

The strike began on October 11, immediately crippling the transport of people and goods over much of France and winning the support of other sections of the working class. Among other demands, the workers requested a wage increase, one day off per week, and employment by the month rather than by the day. Workers refused to comply with the back-to-work order, but Briand correctly calculated that the strike leaders would back down rather than risk the revolutionary implications of a head-on clash with the government.

The martial law orders completed the metamorphosis of Briand into an open servant of the French bourgeoisie. He had been a longstanding member of the Socialist Party, an advocate of syndicalism (a doctrine based on mass industrial action), a founder of the socialist newspaper *L'Humanité*, and a comrade of the leading French socialist, Jean Jaurès.

After accepting a minor ministry in a bourgeois government in 1906, he was expelled from the party. Four years later, he ordered the arrest of strike leaders in the offices of *L'Humanité*, a newspaper he helped found. The day after the end of the strike, Briand ordered a police charge into a crowd of workers that had just been addressed by Jaurès.

Briand was widely praised in ruling circles for his "evolution," as the *New York Times* put it, into a "patriot ... true to the oath of his office." Briand would remain a leading figure of French bourgeois politics until his death in 1934.

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100 years ago: Martial law imposed on week-long French railway strike