

This week in history: June 20-June 26

20 June 2011

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

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25 years ago: Court upholds PATCO blacklist

The US Supreme Court refused on June 20, 1986 to hear an appeal challenging President Ronald Reagan's order to blacklist workers fired in the 1981 US air traffic controllers' strike.

Attorneys representing more than 400 workers claimed that Reagan violated the constitutional separation of powers when he barred air traffic controllers from working at the Federal Aviation Administration for life. They argued Reagan's action conflicted with a federal law that "limits the ability to bar individuals fired as strikers to three years."

On August 3, 1981, over 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) went on strike to demand shorter hours, increased staffing and improved wages. Reagan responded by announcing that strikers who did not return to work within 48 hours would be fired and blacklisted. The 11,359 controllers who defied this threat were left isolated when the AFL-CIO and other major trade unions refused to launch sympathy strikes in their defense, and pilots, mechanics and other unionized airline workers crossed their picket lines.

In the wake of the crushing of the PATCO strike, the ruling class carried out an unprecedented offensive against the working population, breaking strikes at Hormel, TWA, Greyhound, Phelps Dodge copper mine, and dozens of other struggles. As part of this campaign, the Reagan government cut social spending and slashed taxes on the wealthy.

The Federal Aviation Administration said in 1981 that staff levels for air traffic controllers would return to their previous levels within two years, but five years later, there are significantly fewer air traffic controllers employed the day the PATCO strikers walked out.

Documents published shortly before the court decision showed that the replacement workers, many of them drawn from the military, were given their air traffic controller tests in advance to make sure they would pass, endangering the lives of thousands of airline passengers.

50 years ago: Tentative deal to end civil war in Laos

Three princes representing warring factions in Laos announced intentions to form a national unity government on June 22, 1961, as part of an accord aimed at bringing to an end a civil war that had raged in the country since 1953. The agreement, reached in 14-nation talks that took place in Geneva, was set to take effect July 20, but failed to materialize.

The United States, which had been backing right-wing forces in the country grouped around the Royal Lao Army General Vang Pao against a movement allied to the North Vietnamese and supported by the Soviet Union, responded negatively to the proposed accord, because it failed to guarantee a dominant position for the US military as the protector of the new government.

The *New York Times* editorialized that any negotiated deal would fail to secure American interests in the region. "The Communists show little inclination to settle for anything less than a completely dominant position inside Lao and arrangements barring any effective outside Western influence the kingdom," the newspaper's editors complained.

At this time, Laos was becoming a major theater in the US intervention in neighboring Vietnam. Even as the three-way talks were proceeding in Geneva, the US was gearing up for deeper involvement in the region. Ultimately, this would entail the covert training and supplying of royalist forces in Laos, and a massive bombing campaign in the country.

According to the *Guardian* newspaper, between 1964 and 1973, a B-52 bomb load exploded in Laos every eight minutes around the clock. The US military was targeting North Vietnamese supply lines in the country.

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75 years ago: Montreux conference discusses Turkish Straits



At

an international conference began in Montreux, Switzerland on June 22, 1936 concerning the control of the Turkish Straits—the Bosphorus, the sea of Marmara and the Dardanelles. The straits are of immense commercial, military and geo-political significance because they link the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea, thus controlling access for Russian vessels to the Mediterranean.

Prior to Montreux, control of the strategic waterways was established by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. This settlement was drawn up after the victory of Ataturk's Turkish forces against the Greek army during their 1921-22 war. The Dardanelles were consequently deemed an unfortified international waterway. But by the mid-1930s Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy had pushed into the Aegean Sea, holding a small group of islands called the Dodecanese, of which, the island of Rhodes was the most important. Under this pressure, the regime in Ankara, with British support, pushed for a new settlement.

The British government was concerned less with the expansionary designs of Rome than with restricting Soviet warships' access to the British Empire. The Soviet Black Sea Fleet was stationed in the year-round ice-free port of Sevastopol on the Crimean peninsula. British imperialism had sought control of the Dardanelles during the disastrous Gallipoli campaign of 1915 during the First World War, when the Russian Tsar was its ally.

At Montreux, the British put forward the notion that all countries should have equal access through the straits to the Black Sea. The Soviet Union argued that Black Sea states should have much greater access to the waterways than the shipping of non-Black Sea states. After a month of negotiations, on July 21, the strait was returned to Turkish control. As part of the agreement they were also allowed to militarily fortify the straits and access for non-Black Sea states was restricted by class, tonnage and length of stay.

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100 years ago: George V crowned king of Great Britain

George Frederick Ernest Albert was officially elevated to head the British imperial monarchy on June 22, 1911. He was crowned King of Great Britain, Ireland and Dependencies Overseas in

Westminster Abbey, London. A year earlier King Edward VII, George's father, died and his second son ascended to the throne. Consequently, George was also bestowed the title of Emperor of India from 1910 until his death in 1936. Later that same year, after his coronation, the King, together with Queen Mary, would be the first British monarch to attend his own Delhi Durbar.

The King-Emperor George, grandson of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, became ruler just before the outbreak of the First World War, at a time when most of Europe was still ruled by his relatives. He was a first cousin to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. Six years after taking the throne, as World War I extended into its fourth year, George was forced to adopt the family name of House of Windsor and drop his Germanic family name Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Windsor Castle in Berkshire was a longstanding home of the royal family.

The occasion of George's coronation was one of enormous imperial pomp and circumstance. The crowning was celebrated with the Festival of Empire at the Crystal Palace where the British Empire was lionized with displays of prizes from the numerous colonies. At this time the British Empire, of which it was famously said the "sun never set", included what would today be called Canada, Nigeria and Ghana, almost the entirety of East Africa, Iraq, south Yemen, the Indian subcontinent and Burma, large parts of South East Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

Concerned about the emergence of socialism and a restive workers movement the advisers to the royal court attempted to foster a less exclusive style of monarchy. But the King, raised to believe in the total sanctity of King, country and empire, could not hide his sense of innate superiority and his fervent belief in class inequality. The supremely class-conscious Liberal politician Lloyd George was moved to remark of the King, "All his sympathies are with the rich—very little for the poor."

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