

This week in history: September 26-October 2

26 September 2011

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

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the top 1 percent of richest American households increased from 33.8 percent in 1983 to 37.2 percent in 1992, while for the bottom 80 percent share of national wealth fell from 18.7 percent to 16.2 percent.

25 years ago: US Senate approves tax overhaul

On September 27, 1986, the US Senate voted by a lopsided margin to overhaul the tax code to the benefit of the extremely rich. The act, the second of the two major Reagan tax cuts, was written by Democratic Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey and Democratic Representative Richard Gephardt of Missouri, and was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan on October 22, 1986. It was the first major alteration in US tax law in 40 years.

The law cut the income tax rate on the wealthiest Americans from 50 to 28 percent, while simultaneously increasing the tax rate on the poorest citizens from 11 percent to 15 percent. Tax brackets were reduced from 15 to four, and the top corporate tax rate was slashed from 46 percent to 34 percent. The law included a bevy of other measures punishing the poor and low-income workers, including abolishing interest deductions for debt on consumer loans such as credit cards and tightly restricting deductions for Individual Retirement Accounts (IRA).

The 74-23 Senate vote saw 33 Democrats vote in favor of the bill, many of them leading liberals, including senators Kerry and Kennedy of Massachusetts, Gore of Tennessee, Leahy of Vermont, Biden of Delaware, Proxmire of Wisconsin, Glenn of Ohio, Moynihan of New York, Lautenberg of New Jersey, and Harkin of Iowa. Only 12 Democrats, together with 11 Republicans voted against the bill, which was championed by the Reagan administration.

The enormous boondoggle for the rich and the corporations came at a time when the US was racking up, year after year, the highest budget deficits in its history. From 1980 to 1990, the US federal debt would triple from about \$900 billion to over \$3 trillion. Meanwhile the share of national wealth controlled by

50 years ago: United Arab Republic dissolves

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On September 28 and 29, 1961, Syrian military officers launched a coup to remove the country from the United Arab Republic (UAR), the pan-Arab union under the leadership of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. After attempting and failing to crush the revolt with paratroopers, Nasser was forced to tacitly acknowledge Syrian independence.

The revolt began on September 28, when Syrian forces seized a Damascus radio station and other key installations. When Nasser ordered forces under Syrian command to move against the revolt, the latter instead declared their support for it. Nasser's top aide in the country, Field Marshall Abdel Hakim Amer, was arrested and deported on September 29. The same day the new Syrian regime won recognition from Egypt's pro-Western rivals Turkey and Jordan, followed quickly by Iran.

The coup had political support among Syria's business elite, who were opposed to Nasser's nationalization program launched two months earlier. The new interim government was formed under conservative Maamun al-Kuzbari and academic technocrats. In a speech on September 30 decrying the revolt, Nasser said it was led by a "reactionary element" seeking to return Syria to "capitalist exploitation." This was sheer demagogic.

The UAR had, in fact, been sought out in 1958 by the Syrian ruling class as a means of defusing the growing political weight of the working class under the leadership of the Syrian Communist Party. Nasser's efforts at integration were based largely on putting Egyptians in positions of authority in the Syrian state who he could personally trust.

The dissolution of the UAR exposed the bankruptcy of pan-Arabism, whose most prominent advocate was Nasser. While

there existed broad support among the Arab masses for doing away with the national borders foisted on the Middle East and North Africa by Western imperialism, the collapse of the UAR demonstrated that no unity could be achieved that subordinated the working class to the interests of the various national elites.

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75 years ago: Nationalists gain in Spanish Civil War

On September 28, 1936, right-wing Nationalist forces, under the command of General Francisco Franco, defeated the Republican militia that had been laying siege to a Nationalist garrison at the Alcazar in Toledo. Over 900 Republican soldiers died in the battle.

The victory was celebrated by Spain's monarchists and extreme right. The Alcazar had been the residence of the Spanish monarchy after the re-conquest of Toledo from the Moors. Franco declared after the battle, "Defenders of Alcazar, you are the pride of Spain. The old Alcazar is destroyed. We will build another. We are going to build a new Spain and an Empire." On the same day, the Bishop of Salamanca issued a pastoral letter entitled "The Two Cities," approvingly describing the fascist cause as a "crusade."

On September 29, in the Straits of Gibraltar, the battle of Cape Espartel ended when a naval convoy, including Nationalist cruiser ships, sank one Republican destroyer, the *Almirante Ferrandiz*, and badly damaged another, the *Gravina*. The Republican blockade of the Straits was broken. According to the *Times* of London, the Nationalist cruiser ships were escorting armed trawlers carrying Nationalist Army of Africa troops who proceeded to land at Algeciras.

In the Republic, a new Catalan bourgeois cabinet was announced on September 27. Catalan president Lluís Companys' cabinet now included three ministers from the anarchist CNT and two from the centrist POUM. Andres Nin, the leader of the POUM, who only three weeks earlier declared in a speech "Down with the bourgeois ministers," was made minister of justice. The POUM and the CNT had steadfastly refused to consolidate workers' factory committees and militias into a workers' government, and were now taking responsibility for a bourgeois government that was simultaneously suppressing the workers' revolution.

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100 years ago: Italy declares war on Turkey

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On September 29, 1911 Italy declared war on Turkey in its bid to annex the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenaica, which it later merged to form modern-day Libya. The move was part of a broader imperialist scramble for colonies and resources in North Africa and internationally prior to World War One.

The outbreak of the Italo-Turkish war came just months after the Second Moroccan Crisis of July 1911, which had raised the specter of a world war triggered by German-French rivalry in the Maghreb. The conclusion of the Italo-Turkish war in 1912 was followed by the Balkans War, which was also bound up with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire.

Italy had harbored colonial ambitions in North Africa for decades. Having lost Tunisia to the French in 1881, it coveted the Libyan provinces, directly south of Italy, as a "consolation prize." In 1900, Italy and France reached a secret agreement in which France renounced all claims to Tripoli in return for Italian recognition of French rights in Morocco at the expense of Germany.

Before 1911, Italy had been carrying on a program of "peaceful economic penetration" of the Ottoman provinces included shipping, banking, industrial and agricultural enterprises. Tensions mounted when the Turkish regime refused to give monopoly rights in Tripoli to the Banco di Roma, while granting concessions to a German financial syndicate. While the future Libya was considered at the time to have limited economic value, Italy viewed the region as strategically significant as a base for further colonial expansion. Its plans included a naval base at Tobruk, an important natural harbor.

The conflict also served to paper over explosive social tensions in Italy itself. The war was accompanied by a flood of pro-imperialist and nationalist rhetoric in the Italian press and among intellectuals. Criticism was limited, with the Socialist Party divided and only its radical left-wing opposing the war. Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti justified the seizure of the Ottoman provinces as the extension of "civilization" to Tripoli.



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