

This week in history: August 25-September 1

26 August 2013

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

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25 years ago: US government boosts payoff to Socialist Workers Party

The *Militant*, weekly newspaper of the US Socialist Workers Party, announced in its August 26, 1988 issue that the Reagan Administration had approved an additional payment of \$415,000 to the SWP. The payment was part of the settlement of a 15-year lawsuit against the government over the FBI spying and disruption program code-named COINTELPRO, in the course of which hundreds of FBI agents infiltrated the SWP, effectively taking over the organization.

Including an initial payment announced the previous June, the additional sum brought the total government cash paid to the SWP to almost \$700,000—over one-and-a-third million dollars in current value. Such a payoff to a purportedly socialist organization by a capitalist government was unprecedented in the history of the workers' movement.

COINTELPRO operations took place under FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover between 1956 and 1971 against political organizations that the government considered subversive. This period includes the timeframe during which the Carleton 12—a group from the small, conservative Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota—were plugged into the top leadership of the SWP.

The settlement was negotiated between SWP chief counsel, Leonard Boudin, and the US Attorney's office in New York headed by Rudolph Giuliani. The *Militant* report did not indicate when the Reagan Justice Department accepted the agreement, but it apparently took place prior to the departure of Edwin Meese, who announced his resignation as attorney general in early July, effective a month later.

The payoff came in return for an agreement by the SWP to

settle its lawsuit without naming a single government agent inside the SWP. By the FBI's own admission, there were more than 1,600 of its spies in and around the SWP between 1960 and 1976, but neither the FBI nor the SWP wanted these names made public.

Federal District Court Judge Thomas P. Griesa awarded \$264,000 in damages in August 1987, but the government refused to make any admission of guilt or any payment to the SWP and said it would appeal the ruling. This adamant stance was ultimately reversed within the highest levels of the Reagan administration.

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50 years ago: Kennedy blocks railroad strike

On August 28, 1963, US President John F. Kennedy signed into law legislation blocking a nationwide strike of railway workers, which had been set to start the next day. The law, singling out five train operating unions for a no-strike ban of 180 days and imposing arbitration, was without precedent in US history. The House had approved the bill earlier in the day by 286-66 after the Senate had passed an identical version 90-2 a day earlier.

The law created an arbitration board to make a determination on two major issues upon which train firms sought to reduce their labor costs—the size of train crews, and whether or not firemen and locomotive engineers were needed in yard and freight service. Other matters were to be left to collective bargaining.

In a statement Kennedy justified the law by warning that a nationwide rail strike would have “crippled the economy,” citing the precedence of the “public interest.” The unions backed down before the law, but issued a statement calling the decision “regrettable and a backward step in the preservation of the rights of workers.”

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75 years ago: Germany-Czechoslovakia crisis over Sudetenland intensifies

This week in 1938 the crisis provoked by Nazi Germany's designs on Czechoslovakia reached a new level of intensity, with speculation in the media that war between France and the United Kingdom, on one side, and Germany on the other, was imminent, and with the British government of Neville Chamberlain seeking to avert war by compelling Czechoslovakia to accept German demands.

German Chancellor Adolf Hitler, joined by Nazi provocateurs among the German-speaking minority in Czechoslovakia, demanded the cession to Germany of the border regions known as Sudetenland, which had heavy ethnic-German concentrations. Nazi Germany had already been emboldened in its flouting of international law and the Treaty of Versailles by its remilitarization and the absorption of Austria in the Anschluss of March 1938.

On August 28 Chamberlain recalled to London the British ambassador to Germany, Neville Henderson, in order to arrange for a personal meeting between Chamberlain and Hitler. Meanwhile, in Prague, a special British delegation seeking a truce led by Lord Runciman had already made clear its support for ceding the Sudetenland to Germany.

In fact, Hitler had already made the final decision to destroy Czechoslovakia days earlier, having informed Hungarian dictator Admiral Horthy that Hungary should join in the attack to gain Ruthenia at its neighbor's expense. On August 27 German chief of staff General Beck, who opposed war with Czechoslovakia, resigned. On September 1, at a conference at Berchtesgaden with German-Czech Nazi Konrad Henlein, Hitler publicly rejected the offer of a two-month truce from the Czechoslovak government.

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100 years ago: Dublin transport workers strike

On August 26, 1913, members of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), went on strike in response to the dismissal and lockout on August 21 of 100 union members from William Martin Murphy's Tramways Company. Murphy was one of Ireland's most powerful and wealthy businessmen who formed the Dublin Employers' Federation that refused to recognize the ITGWU.

Murphy had refused to employ ITGWU members on both his newspaper, the *Irish Independent*, and his Tramways Company, and he forbade workers from joining the union,

which had nonetheless won concessions for workers with "sympathy strikes." On the first day of the Dublin Horse Show, one of the city's busiest events, drivers and conductors stopped and abandoned their trams at 10 a.m. and *Irish Independent* distributors and dockworkers stopped work in sympathy.

On August 28, five ITGWU leaders were arrested for conspiracy and libel but were soon released on bail. The strike intensified and violent clashes erupted between police and strikers and their supporters, resulting in the death of protester James Nolan, who was clubbed to death by police.

The Employers' Federation responded with a lockout, sacking hundreds who refused to sign a pledge to resign from the ITGWU and other unions supporting the strike. The bosses were particularly adamant because of the prominent role played in the union by socialists like James Larkin, the central leader of the strike/lockout, and James Connolly, who led the Easter Rising against British rule three years later.

The strike continued, and by October families in tenements were close to starving. Unions in England shipped provisions to the strikers. Irish union leaders organized to send starving children to sympathetic families in England, but were blocked after a campaign led by the Catholic Church to prevent the children from being subject to Protestant and atheist influence.

The unions were prepared to enter talks but employers refused to negotiate on the issue of prohibiting ITGWU membership. Larkin was sentenced to seven months for incitement but was released within a fortnight. He travelled to Britain to win support among British trade unions for a general strike in support of Dublin workers, but without success.

On January 18, 1914, the ITGWU leadership met secretly and decided to end the strike, but told members not to sign the Employers' Federation contract. In February 1914, the strike was broken with 3,000 members of the Builders Labourers Union signing the contract, followed by other workers.

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