This week in history: October 28-November 3

28 October 2013

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

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years: Public sector strike wave shakes French government

In late October and early November 1988, virtually the entire public sector in France seethed with wildcat strikes and the formation of strike and coordination committees. After barely six months in office, the social democratic government of Michel Rocard reeled from the offensive of hundreds of thousands of public sector workers against its austerity measures and budget cuts.

Postmen at eight of the main sorting centers in the Paris area, Lille and Rouen have been on strike for two weeks. Wildcat strikes by maintenance technicians and other service workers at Air France spread from the large Paris airports to provincial airports.

Strikes had been organized by the railway workers of the SNCF, the national railways, postal workers of the PTT, the metro and transit workers of the RATP, electricity and gas workers of the EDF-GDF, teachers and other public service and government employees. The previous week saw demonstrations in the capital and the provinces, each numbering tens of thousands of workers.

The strike wave was precipitated by the militant nurses' strike, by then in its third week, led by the Nurses' National Coordinating Committee that mobilized 100,000 nurses from a total of 175,000 in a mass demonstration the previous week in Paris.

Pierre Beregovoy, Rocard's finance minister, called on the public sector workers not to defend themselves against the government's austerity measures. Making dire warnings about "inflationary escalations" that would do "enormous damage to our foreign trade," he said, "I appeal with confidence to the responsibility of the wage earners."

Socialist Party President Francois Mitterrand, who had earlier made a vague statement in favor of the nurses, reversed himself, saying that the nurses are "asking too much" and that it will take a number of years to "revalue the nurses' pay and conditions."

[top]

50 years ago: Diem assassinated in US-backed coup

On November 1 a cabal of South Vietnamese generals led by Duong Van Minh, acting with the backing and financial support of the US, overthrew the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem. On November 2 Ngo and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, were brutally murdered by the conspirators.

Diem and Nhu and their supporters, all drawn from a Roman Catholic elite trained under French colonialism, had become a liability in Washington's drive to crush the insurgency of the National Liberation Front, which sought land reform and reunification of the country. The corruption of the Diem regime was well known, and his administration's crackdown on Buddhists in the spring and summer of 1963 had created a situation in which the regime had negligible popular support.

US President John F. Kennedy, along with other top administration officials including Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Averell Harriman, participated in the preparation of the coup, White House memorandum and tapes would later reveal. The decision to remove Diem took place in late August. To encourage the generals, Washington promised its support and also delivered $42,000 in cash bribes through the CIA. An October 29 meeting found the US president questioning advisors on which South Vietnamese forces that would work with the coup, and those that would remain loyal to Diem.

Hours after the coup began, Diem called Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., the American ambassador to South Vietnam, and asked him "what the attitude of the US is." Lodge responded that "the US cannot possibly have an official view at this time," when in fact Lodge's office had already transmitted

© World Socialist Web Site

the coup order.

Diem and his brother escaped from the presidential palace through a secret tunnel but were apprehended the next day and murdered in the back of a US-made armored personnel carrier by gun and bayonet. An unnamed US operative photographed Diem's body after the killing.

[top]

75 years ago: Orson Welles creates sensation with broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*

On the evening of October 30, 1938, Orson Welles directed and narrated a radio adaptation of the H.G. Wells science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds* on CBS Radio as part of the "Mercury Theatre on the Air" series.

Broadcast without commercial breaks and in a style that aped the news reporting of the period, Welles confused listeners who tuned in mid-broadcast into believing the "events" portrayed—an alien invasion of earth—were real. The subsequent media reaction accusing Welles of deception and public irresponsibility would only assist in securing his status as a renowned dramatist and master showman.

The rise of European fascism, the ongoing dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, the barbarity of Franco's Fascist forces in Spain and those of the Imperial Japanese army in occupied China and the very real threat of an imminent war in Europe created a febrile social atmosphere into which Welles's show consciously tapped.

H.G. Wells first published *The War of the Worlds* in 1898. The prototypical science fiction novel tells of an alien invasion of England at the peak of her empire. The aliens wage a merciless campaign against the British and enslave the survivors before being ultimately felled by microbes.

[top]

100 years ago: Victim of anti-Semitic frame-up acquitted in Tsarist Russia

On October 28, 1913, Menahem Mendel Beilis, a Ukrainian Jew who was the victim of an infamous anti-Semitic frame-up orchestrated by the Tsarist autocracy, was acquitted of the murder of an eleven-year-old boy. The acquittal took place in the context of an international outcry over the persecution of Beilis, who was accused of murdering the child as part of a blood ritual, an archetype of anti-Semitic propaganda.

Beilis, a factory superintendent, had been charged with the murder of a Ukrainian boy, whose decapitated body was found in March, 1911, in Kiev. No evidence tied Beilis to the murder, and he had an alibi, having been at work when the boy had been abducted. The charges were based solely on vague anti-Semitic claims made by a lamplighter. Beilis's arrest in July 1911 was followed by a vicious anti-Semitic campaign, led by the government press, which presented the murder as a Jewish blood ritual.

A leading Kiev police investigator, who refused to participate in the frame-up, investigated the case independently, establishing that the boy's killers were known criminals. Shortly after, he was charged with official indiscretions which had allegedly occurred in 1903, and the trial of Beilis went ahead in September 1913.

Prosecution witnesses presented as authorities on the Jewish faith included well-known anti-Semites and others, who, it was later revealed, had been bribed by Tsarist authorities. A number of the jurors were members of the anti-Semitic, "Black Hundreds" organization, which regularly conducted pogroms against the Jewish population.

Beilis was only acquitted following a major international outcry, and the disintegration of the prosecution case. Nevertheless, the reactionary press in Russia and throughout Europe hailed the trial as a victory, as the official verdict still implied that the murder had been linked to a Jewish ritual.

The Marxist Leon Trotsky, commented on the Beilis case, while covering the Balkan wars as a war correspondent. Trotsky considered the case a particularly poignant expression of the reactionary character of the Tsarist autocracy, noting that reading the trial transcripts, he had reacted "first and foremost with a feeling of physical nausea."

[top]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site