

This week in history: November 4-10

4 November 2013

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

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25 years ago: Republican candidate George H.W. Bush wins US presidential election

US Republican presidential candidate George H.W. Bush defeated Democrat Michael Dukakis by a wide majority in the election held November 8, 1988. The election marked a significant rightward shift in US and world politics.

Despite the revelations of the criminal and anti-democratic conspiracy conducted in the Iran-Contra affair by the Reagan administration, in which Bush was vice president, the Democrats refused to conduct a political offensive that could mobilize the population. In addition, neither campaign even mentioned that social conditions facing masses of US citizens had been declining steadily since 1972 and more people were living in poverty since the time of the ghetto rebellions of the 1960s. In fact, more people were hungry, homeless and unemployed in America in 1988 than at any time since the Great Depression.

Bush and the Republicans sought to witch-hunt Dukakis for liberalism, even though it was liberalism of the most anemic variety, demonstrated in the Democratic candidate's response, which was to distance himself as far as possible from any connection to policies of social reform or government action to improve the living conditions of workers and the poor.

With both campaigns promoting law-and-order and austerity, only 48.7 percent of eligible voters turned out to the polls, the lowest turnout since 1924. Bush won a majority of the popular vote and a lopsided 80 percent of the votes in the Electoral College.

Bush's election, far from providing a political mandate, demonstrated the bankruptcy of the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO union bureaucracy. After eight years of defeated and betrayed strikes, declining living standards and factory shutdowns, the AFL-CIO spent over \$40 million of workers' dues money in support for the Dukakis campaign.

The Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, sought to prepare the working class to fight for its political independence against its subordination to the Democratic Party by the unions. The party ran Ed Winn, a New York City transit worker, as its presidential candidate, and succeeded in placing him on the ballot in eight states: Alabama, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio and Pennsylvania, as well as in the District of Columbia.

The campaign was not primarily an electoral exercise, but a means of educating and preparing the most class-conscious sections of

workers for revolutionary struggle against the new attacks that would be carried out by both parties after the elections.

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50 years ago: Japanese coal mine explosion kills 438

On November 9, 1963, an explosion in the Miike coalmine in Japan killed 458 miners. Another 1,197 suffered from acute carbon monoxide poisoning in the mine, located in Fukuoka and Kumamoto prefectures on the island of Kyushu. The 1,665 dead and sickened make the Miike disaster among the worst in mining history.

The explosion took place at 3:12 p.m. during shift change, after a cart carrying coal derailed, plummeting 360 meters to the bottom of the mine where its impact ignited a coal dust explosion that ripped through the mine at a clip of 1,000 meters per second. Only 20 miners died in the explosion. The rest of the death toll was caused by the carbon monoxide released by the blast.

The owner of the mine, the Mitsui Coal Mine Company, a subsidiary of one of Japan's largest industrial-financial conglomerates, the Mitsui Group, had taken no precautions against dust explosions. No efforts were made to water the mine, or mix rock powder with the coal dust, the two most used methods for averting coal explosions. No safety measures were in place to isolate carbon monoxide after an explosion to prevent its circulation throughout the mine. And Mitsui provided no safety training for workers on carbon monoxide poisoning.

After the blast the company delayed rescue operations, unaware or indifferent to the threat posed by carbon monoxide. In one shaft about 150 workers, then uninjured, were ordered to wait for rescue. They died from carbon monoxide inhalation.

The disaster came two years after the Miike coal mine strike of 1959-1960, one of the most important in Japanese history. The strike was waged against layoffs—including in the area of safety personnel—and against the Japanese government plan to reduce the national mine labor force concentrated in Kyushu by one third, cutting 100,000 jobs, by 1963. The implications of layoffs were dire: a medical survey of nearly 900 children of jobless miners in the region conducted in 1960 found only 7 percent healthy, with the rest suffering symptoms of malnutrition, including bloated stomachs.

The strike, which coincided with massive opposition to the renewal of the Japanese-American Security Treaty, went down to defeat in spite of the solidarity of the coal miners and other sections of the working class. On one day during the strike, 300,000 workers from across Japan demonstrated outside of Miike. In spite of the intensity of opposition, the Japanese General Council of Trade Unions (Sohyo), along with the Japanese socialist and communist parties, opposed

launching a nationwide general strike.

The defeat at Miike set the stage for a vast restructuring of Japanese labor-management relations at the expense of the working class and in favor of a corporate-dominated “new common sense.” In the Miike mine employment dropped by 5,000 to 10,000 workers, even though daily coal production doubled from 8,000 tons per day to 15,000. Safety personnel were reduced.

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75 years ago: Nazi Kristallnacht attacks against German Jews

On the night of November 9-10, 1938, mass pogroms against German Jews and Jewish property were organized and executed by the ruling fascist regime. The night’s bloody events became known as “Kristallnacht” (literally “Crystal Night,” on account of the countless glass shards that littered pavements the morning after the mass assault). Many Jews were assaulted and killed, thousands imprisoned in concentration camps, and synagogues, businesses and homes wantonly burned, wrecked and vandalized.

Some historians consider the night’s events to be the beginning of the Holocaust. “The night of horror, a retreat in a modern state to the savagery associated with bygone ages, laid bare to the world the barbarism of the Nazi regime,” writes Ian Kershaw. “Within Germany, it brought immediate draconian measures to exclude Jews from the economy, accompanied by a restructuring of anti-Jewish policy, placing it now directly under the control of the SS, whose leaders linked war, expansion, and eradication of Jewry.”

When the Nazis came to power in 1933 there were approximately 50,000 Jewish-owned businesses in Germany. By July 1938 there was just 9,000 remaining. But during the same time period, up until Kristallnacht at least, despite a half decade of barbaric fascist rule, three quarters of Germany’s Jewish population remained.

The death on the afternoon of November 9 of the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath in Paris after being shot two days earlier by a young German-Jew, Herschel Grynszpan, was used by the Nazis as the catalyst for the pogroms. The death of vom Rath coincided with the 15th anniversary of Hitler’s 1923 unsuccessful beer hall putsch in Munich, so Nazi members were gathered across the country, frequently drunk, and easily roused by calls for retaliation. But there was nothing spontaneous about the events of Kristallnacht, which were organized and instigated by the party leadership, including Joseph Goebbels, the minister of propaganda, and Adolf Eichmann, an SS leader.

Grynszpan’s family, together with 18,000 other German-born Jews of Polish descent, had been dumped over the border into Poland in late October. Writing about Grynszpan, Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Fourth International, explained, “A single isolated hero cannot replace the masses. But we understand only too clearly the inevitability of such convulsive acts of despair and vengeance.”

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100 years ago: Transit workers strike in Indianapolis

A major strike of transit workers in Indianapolis, Indiana, ended on November 7, 1913 after Governor Samuel Ralston declared martial law in the city two days earlier. Thousands of strikers and their supporters had been involved in days of violent clashes with strikebreakers and the police.

On October 31, workers in the Indianapolis Traction and Terminal Company voted at a mass meeting to take action against management’s suppression of a unionization campaign led by the Amalgamated Street Railway Employees of America. The 900 workers were paid less and worked longer hours than union labor at a small transport company.

Some workers showed up for work on November 1, but many were absent and only half of the routes began operating. By the end of the day, the entire streetcar operations as well as the inter-city light rail were shut down as strikers and their supporters blocked tracks, confronted strikebreakers and sabotaged streetcars.

Bitter clashes erupted on November 2 after the company brought in hundreds of professional strikebreakers hired by the notorious Pinkerton Agency. Up to 10,000 strikers and their supporters fought with police and scabs. Outnumbered by protesters, police fled and refused to return when ordered. By the end of November 3, fewer than 50 police were still on duty. Violent clashes continued on November 4, when four union supporters and two strikebreakers were killed and many more injured.

Indianapolis Mayor Samuel Shank called for intervention by Indiana Governor Samuel M. Ralston, who sent in the National Guard and imposed martial law on the city November 5. The following day, a large crowd of angry protesters gathered outside the Indiana statehouse to demand that their grievances be addressed. Faced with the threat of further protests, Shank addressed the crowd, promising to withdraw the National Guard, to facilitate arbitration and seek legislation to improve wages and conditions.

Ralston called a meeting between the company and union leaders on November 7 to broker a temporary deal pending arbitration. Workers voted later that day to end the strike. The same month, the Indiana General Assembly enacted the state’s first laws to establish a minimum wage, regular working hours and work safety requirements. Arbitration by the Indiana Public Service Commission made limited concessions to transport workers, including the right to unionize, but permitted the company to continue to hire nonunion employees.

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