This week in history: November 18-24

18 November 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 ago: Soviet court rehabilitates Trotsky's son Sergei Sedov

The Soviet state newspaper *Izvestia* announced on November 21, 1988 the judicial rehabilitation of the youngest son of Leon Trotsky, Sergei Sedov. The Soviet Supreme Court action was an admission that Sedov's execution during Stalin's purges of 1937-1938 was an act of state murder.

A talented engineer who published works on thermodynamics and diesel engines, Sergei Sedov became a professor at the Moscow Institute of Technology while in his twenties. He was not active in politics.

Though his only "crime" was that he was the son of Trotsky, the main defendant in the Moscow Trials, Sedov was arrested, first in early 1935 with the first purges, and was sentenced to five years of administrative exile in Siberia. He was subsequently re-arrested in 1936 and sent to a labor camp in Vorkuta.

As Stalin's second round of purges began in 1937, the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, charged Sedov with trying to poison factory workers. His death sentence is believed to have been carried out on October 29, 1937. He was just 29 years old.

The rehabilitation was in response to the written appeal of Sedov's daughter, Yulia Akselrod, to President Mikhail Gorbachev. Akselrod, who had immigrated to the US in 1979, asked questions about the circumstances of her father's death and sought to clear his name.

The *Izvestia* announcement of Sedov's rehabilitation was just two sentences, giving few details.

Trotsky was assassinated in 1940, and his older son, Leon Sedov, in 1938. They both conducted a relentless political struggle against the counterrevolutionary betrayals of Stalin. Neither was ever rehabilitated by Stalin's political successors.

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50 years ago: US President Kennedy assassinated

On November 22, 1963 John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was shot dead in Dallas, Texas, at 12:30 p.m., as his presidential motorcade made its way around Dealey Plaza. Kennedy suffered wounds to the upper back and the throat, and a fatal shot to the head. Texas governor John Connally, who was travelling with Kennedy in the top-down convertible, was also wounded.

Lee Harvey Oswald, who was initially arrested for the killing of police officer J.D. Tippit, was arraigned on the night of November 22 on the charge of killing Kennedy. Earlier, as he was walked by police past media, Oswald was asked about the assassination. He responded, "I'm just a patsy." Oswald was never able to testify, because two days later, amidst a heavy police escort, in the basement of the Dallas Police Headquarters, he was gunned down by Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby as millions watched live on television.

Oswald had been a US Marine in 1959 when he defected to the Soviet Union. He requested and received his US passport, along with a loan from the State Department, enabling him to return to the US in 1962. He settled in Dallas where he cultivated relations with right-wing Russian émigrés, and in 1963 he moved to New Orleans where he became the sole member there of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, an allegedly pro-Castro organization heavily infiltrated by the FBI.

Ruby died of cancer in 1967 as he awaited a retrial for the killing of Oswald. He had earlier requested of the Warren Commission, the official investigation of the Kennedy assassination, that he be transferred to Washington, D.C., claiming "my life is in danger here" and that "I want to tell the truth, and I can't tell it here." The request was denied.

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75 years ago: Daladier moves against French workers

On November 22, 1938 France's Radical Party prime minister, Edouard Daladier, instructed prefects throughout the country to break factory and workplace occupations.

Resistance from the working class emerged because of the

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plans by Daladier's Radical Party and Finance Minister Paul Reynaud for economic austerity and deregulation to rescue the falling franc, rein in public debt and increase production in the defense industries.

Working class opposition was strongest among industrial workers in the cities of Lille and Valenciennes, but by November 24, strikes had spread to the Paris region and involved the workers at Renault motor plant and workers at the Caudron and Bloch aircraft factories. Police soon cleared the Bloch premises without major incident, but at the Renault factory, police fired tear gas, injured 10 workers, and arrested 200.

Fortunately for the government, the workers' opposition was dominated by the thoroughly Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). Secretary General Maurice Thorez, speaking in Noisy-le-Sec, outlined his party's wholly opportunist political line: "The workers are ready to work all the time required in order to manufacture the arms necessary to checkmate Hitler, on condition that Daladier goes." When the PCF eventually called a single-day general strike at the end of the month, Daladier's administration had its measure and easily faced it down.

The Executive Committee of the Confederation Generale du Travail, the Stalinist-led union body, unanimously decided to recommend all its membership walk out for a limited protest against the Daladier-Reynaud decrees. The terms of a general strike were fixed on November 25. In response, the Daladier government issued a ban on all open-air meetings or demonstrations in the Paris region organized for November 26.

The London *Times* summed up the thinking of the union leadership, which was focused on suppressing the working class. "Responsible trade union leaders are not unduly anxious to carry opposition to the decrees too far," it observed, "but at the same time they are naturally apprehensive lest too great a moderation on their part should tempt the rank and file to take matters into their own hands."

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100 years ago: General strike in New Zealand called off

On November 23, 1913 a strike committee in Auckland voted to call off the general strike that had paralyzed New Zealand's largest city for two weeks and other towns and cities since the beginning of October. Strike leaders had been arrested for sedition and striking waterside workers replaced by scab labor. In December, the United Federation of Labour (UFL) ordered a general resumption of work.

The "Great Strike" of 1913 was part of an international upsurge of the working class prior to World War I. It began when employers in Huntly and Wellington provocatively sacked miners and shipwrights who were members of the UFL, or the "Red Federation," which had refused to register under the Reform Party government's oppressive Arbitration Act.

Wharfies and miners around the country struck in support and were joined by drivers, laborers, seamen and firemen, all of whom raised their own demands. The UFL leadership, which sought to settle the dispute, was unsuccessful in either limiting the strike or bargaining with the employers. One striker later recalled: "The rank and file were the leaders." Some 16,000 workers, a quarter of the total union membership, took part. Australian waterside workers and seamen boycotted New Zealand ships.

Prime Minister William Massey used the Farmers' Union to mobilize thousands of special constables, known as "Massey's Cossacks," to brutally suppress the strike wave. Pitched battles erupted on the streets of Wellington. Troops with bayonets and machine guns were sent to the waterfront. The Sydney *Morning Herald* reported a "sort of modified civil war" in New Zealand, while entry of the specials into Auckland provoked the citywide general strike, in which the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) played a prominent role.

Without a perspective to prosecute a political struggle against the government, beset with growing hardships and state repression, the strike was worn down and defeated. Unregistered unions were stripped of immunity from penalties for striking, and a more punitive arbitration regime put in place.

While the working class emerged from the bitter struggle more unified and militant, key UFL leaders—Harry Holland, Peter Fraser and Bob Semple—sought to steer the class hostility to the government into parliamentary channels. In 1916, they were instrumental in founding the NZ Labour Party.

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