This week in history: January 13-19

13 January 2014

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: Framed Kentucky miners appeal denied

After a federal court denied the appeal of four framed-up Kentucky miners, the January 13, 1989 issue of the *Bulletin* newspaper, published by the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, called for an all-out defense campaign in the labor movement. The week before, the Fifth District Court of Appeals in Cincinnati ruled against the appeal of the miners and upheld their 35-to-45-year prison sentences.

The ruling was upheld despite the lack of any direct evidence that the miners were involved in the May 1985 incident resulting in the death of strikebreaking truck driver Hayes West. A number of witnesses testified that the shoot-up of the coal truck he drove was a provocation staged by the company to obtain a court injunction against picketing in order to break the strike. The bitter strike at the A.T. Massey Coal Company and its subsidiaries lasted 15 months.

The four miners—Donnie Thornsberry, his cousin David Thornsberry, Arnold Heightland, and Darryl Smith—had been imprisoned since August 1987. In its appeal to labor, the *Bulletin* stated:

"The jailing of the four Kentucky miners caps a decade of defeats and betrayals which the labor movement has suffered. From PATCO to the coal miners, these defeats have essentially the same cause: the sabotage of every struggle by the trade union bureaucrats of the AFL-CIO and UMWA" (United Mine Workers of America).

The article also reported that two days before Christmas, the UMWA cut off strike pay benefits for two of the wives of the jailed miners, forcing Venita Thornsberry, Donnie's wife, to file for welfare.

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50 years ago: Army revolt in Tanganyika

On January 20, 1964, an army revolt was launched in Tanganyika against President Julius K. Nyerere and his cabinet. After troops seized the airport of the capital, Dar es Salaam, the post office and the telephone exchange, and arrested cabinet members, the coup fizzled when elements of the army still loyal to Nyerere reasserted authority. The revolt was politically inchoate, but was in part directed against the white British officer corps, which had remained at the command of the national army after independence in 1961. Seventeen were killed in the fighting.

The failed coup in Tanganyika followed by less than a week a successful coup in the neighboring island state of Zanzibar. The Zanzibar coup, which forced the Sultan of Zanzibar to flee, was led by the self-styled "field marshal" John Okello. Thousands of Arabs and Indians were slaughtered in the Zanzibar coup.

Tanganyika had been a German colony until World War I, when it was seized by Great Britain and held for nearly half a century, until independence. Nyerere, the son of a tribal chief, was still considered in 1964 a "pro-Western moderate," according to the *New York Times*.

After the coup in Zanzibar and the failed coup in Tanganyika, Nyerere shifted political alliances, seeking international support from the People's Republic of China. Later in 1964, Zanzibar and Tanganyika unified to form Tanzania, and by 1965 Nyerere's one-party dictatorship had been fully implemented.

In 1967, Nyerere issued his "Arusha Declaration," declaring an "African Socialism" to which he gave the Swahili name for family, "ujamaa." The program had nothing to do with socialism, but sought the "villagization" of economic production and the national self-reliance of Tanzania. Ujamaa fell apart in the late 1970s and 1980s, and Tanzania remained mired in extreme poverty.

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75 years ago: IRA bombs British cities

On Monday January 16, 1939, at approximately 6 a.m., a series of five bombs planted by operatives of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) exploded in London and Manchester. One civilian was killed, two injured and substantial damage was inflicted on buildings and infrastructure associated with the British power grid.

The attacks of mid-January were the opening shots of the IRA's "Sabotage Campaign," aimed at civilian targets and designed to force the British authorities to negotiate over the future of Ireland. Placards found near the scene of the explosions, one of them outside the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Southwark, London, called upon Irish people residing within Great Britain to support a "Republic of All-Ireland." By its conclusion later in the spring, the campaign had killed seven British civilians and injured nearly 100.

Ireland, Britain's first colony, had been subject to harsh imperial repression until independence in 1921 in the Anglo-Irish Treaty. That treaty gave Ireland nominal independence, but left Ulster as part of the United Kingdom. Irish nationalists opposing this treaty, including the IRA, took up arms against the Irish Free State, and the bloody Irish Civil War of 1922-1923 followed. The Free State, backed by British arms, prevailed. Those in British-controlled Ulster seeking unification with the rest of the island faced harsh repression.

The IRA had no perspective to achieve unity of Ireland. Opposed to socialism and the mobilization of workers across the United Kingdom and internationally against colonialism and capitalist exploitation, the IRA considered itself the legitimate capitalist government of Ireland. Aided by state vilification, the bombing campaign exacerbated anti-Irish sentiments amongst sections of the British public and brought the weight of the British state down upon Irish communities in the larger British towns and cities.

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100 years ago: Police frame up IWW songwriter Joe Hill

On January 13, 1914, Joe Hill, a member of the revolutionary-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organization, widely known for his radical songwriting, was arrested in connection with the murder of John G. Morrison, a grocer and former policeman, and his son, in Salt Lake City. On January 20, Hill would be formally charged with the murder, despite the existence of other plausible suspects and a lack of evidence against him.

The Morrisons had been fatally shot when two men wearing bandanas obscuring their faces stormed into their grocery store on the evening of January 10. It was suspected by police that the killing was an act of revenge, as nothing was stolen. As many as 12 people were arrested in the following days. Hill, an itinerant migrant worker originally from Sweden, came under suspicion because he had received a gunshot wound on the night of the 10th. He told the doctor who treated him that he had been wounded in a fight with a rival suitor over a young woman, but refused to give the police any further details.

Following a trial in Utah, Hill was convicted and sentenced to death. A number of eyewitnesses who claimed at the trial to have seen Hill at the scene of the murder had failed to identify him when first questioned, and no murder weapon was produced.

The IWW, which Hill had joined in 1910, had recently played a leading role in a series of militant workers' struggles which had made it a target of the establishment press and the state. Prominent public figures supported a bid for clemency, and a far-reaching campaign was carried out by the IWW and the labor movement. Despite this, Hill was executed by firing squad on November 19, 1915.

Recent scholarship has reinforced the opinion that Hill was unjustly convicted. The findings include the discovery of a letter to Hill from a woman supporting the claim that he was shot by a rival suitor and indications that the murder was committed by Frank Z. Wilson, a career criminal and plausible suspect who was arrested but subsequently released by police.

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