

This week in history: April 14-20

14 April 2014

25 years ago: 96 die in British stadium disaster

A football match at Sheffield's Hillsborough Stadium on April 15, 1989 became Britain's worst-ever sports disaster. The final casualty count was 96 dead and more than 200 injured in the stampede into the stadium, after police opened a 16-foot-wide gateway to let spectators in from the overflow crowd outside the stadium to a standing-room-only viewing terrace.

The event, a national semifinal match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest football clubs, drew thousands of fans, many of whom were unable to get into the stadium and surged against locked turnstiles. A senior police officer made the decision to open the gate leading to the viewing area behind the Liverpool goal to alleviate what police described as a "life-threatening situation." The victims of the ensuing stampede were asphyxiated and crushed. Most were young men, but small children were also among them.

A doctor at the scene described the medical conditions as "absolute chaos." He said, "There was no organized (medical) response at all. There was nobody in charge, no plan, no organization at all. I had to make sure the people who were still alive and most seriously injured were got off to hospital first." He noted that there was no resuscitation equipment available on the scene.

Another doctor, who rushed onto the field to help the injured, said he asked for an electric shock machine at one point and was told there was none at the stadium. Later, he was given an oxygen tank that turned out to be empty. He called the situation "appalling" and "an absolute disgrace."

A funeral service was held for the victims at a Liverpool that Sunday with 10,000 mourners attending. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher announced a full-scale public inquiry into the disaster, which produced a whitewash.

A generation later, in September 2012, the Hillsborough Independent Panel issued a report proving that the deaths were entirely the result of corporate, police and emergency services negligence. More recently, families of some of the victims alleged that they were subject to police surveillance after the disaster.

50 years ago: Right-wing coup in Laos

On April 19, 1964, a coup by right-wing army generals overthrew the regime of Prince Souvanna Phouma, who under the guise of "neutrality" had been serving as a proxy of US interests.

The coup followed the breakdown of talks between Souvanna Phouma, the Stalinist-led Pathet Lao, and General Phoumi Nosovan, head of the right-wing forces. Souvanna Phouma had called the talks as a means of bringing the Pathet Lao back into his coalition government. Phouma's half brother, Prince Sopheanouvong, was leader of the insurgent Pathet Lao, which controlled two-thirds of the country's territory.

An agreement among the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, China, and North Vietnam established the Souvanna Phouma regime as a buffer state sharing borders with both North Vietnam and South Vietnam. His so-called neutrality consisted of maintaining US interests by maintaining a truce with the Pathet Lao while Washington waged war in South Vietnam. Overthrown in 1958, Phouma regained power in 1960.

The coup brought together the US and the Soviet bureaucracy, which shared a common fear that the rightist coup would provoke an explosion among the Laotian masses. Expressing concern that the coup regime could not maintain itself in power without the tacit support of the Stalinists, the Johnson administration pressured the generals one week later to form a new coalition government with Souvanna Phouma.

The coup coincided with a three-day visit to South Vietnam by US Secretary of State Dean Rusk to discuss increased US support for the embattled puppet regime. National Liberation Front guerrillas struck within 14 miles of Saigon during Rusk's visit.

75 years ago: Roosevelt shifts naval fleet to Asia

On April 16, 1939, US President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the bulk of the US naval fleet into the Pacific. His order sent 158 ships in the US Navy into the Pacific, protecting such outposts as Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines, while leaving only 100 ships in the Atlantic.

Japan had just seized the formerly French-controlled Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, putting it in position to dominate maritime routes between British Singapore and Borneo, French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, the US-ruled Philippines, and the British colony at Hong Kong.

The concentration of British and French naval forces in the Atlantic against the German-Italian Axis had left Japan with a free hand in the Far East and eastern Pacific, where Britain and France still retained sizeable colonial possessions.

The White House combined the order for naval buildup in the Pacific with a simultaneous appeal to the European fascist dictators, Hitler and Mussolini, for 10 years of peace. The *New York Times* admitted that the plea to the fascist butchers to refrain from aggression against 31 countries was “for the record,” to allow Roosevelt to put the onus for his war preparations on the Axis powers’ refusal to accept “peace” on US terms.

In his political struggle against “isolationists” in the US Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, Roosevelt was well aware he was facing, not genuine opposition to militarism, but an opposed perception of where the main priority for US imperialism’s ambitions lay—across the Pacific, according to the isolationists, across the Atlantic for Roosevelt and the dominant sections of the US ruling elite. Roosevelt sought to weaken the isolationists by tying his military buildup to a more aggressive posture in the Pacific.

100 years ago: The Ludlow Massacre

On April 20, 1914, some two dozen workers, and their relatives, including women and children, were killed by the Colorado National Guard and private goons of the Rockefeller owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. Known as the Ludlow Massacre, the murderous rampage of state authorities against striking workers is considered one of the most violent industrial incidents in the pre-World War I period, which witnessed numerous militant struggles by workers across the US. (See “Remembering the Ludlow Massacre”).

The massacre was the culmination of an industrial battle between the major mining companies in Colorado and 11,000 striking coal miners, which began on September 6, 1913. The miners—who faced a death-rate double the

national average, were regularly paid less than they were due and denied the right to organize—were striking for better work conditions and pay, along with recognition of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) by the employers.

As soon as the strike began, workers were evicted from the company homes, forcing them to move into makeshift tent encampments.

As the refusal of the workers to capitulate to the intimidation, threats and violence of the miners became clear, the mine owners along with state authorities prepared a bloody provocation.

Early on April 20, representatives of the state militia and the companies appeared at the workers’ encampment, demanding the release of an individual they claimed was being held there. One of the leaders of the workers’ leaders, Louis Tiklas, met with authorities to discuss the situation—during which time state and company militias set up machine guns on a ridge overlooking the camp. They opened fire, indiscriminately mowing down workers and their families.

While some poorly armed detachments of workers sought to resist the onslaught, they were quickly overpowered by reinforcements of the National Guard. As workers retreated, company thugs and guardsmen set fire to their tents. Eleven young children and two mothers were caught in an underground cellar that had been constructed by strikers in anticipation of an attack on the camp. They all perished. Tiklas and other workers’ leaders were killed, execution-style.

The deadly assault led to international outrage. Other sections of the working class responded, refusing to transport troops, cutting communication lines, and traveling to Ludlow with arms. Over the following 10 days, workers fought armed battles with the guardsmen and the company thugs. Fear of the conflict developing into a broader, and potentially insurrectionary crisis prompted the administration of Woodrow Wilson to send federal troops to Ludlow.



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