

This week in history: May 12-18

12 May 2014

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25 years ago: Tiananmen protesters defy bureaucracy's threats

On May 12, 1989, after more than three weeks of protesting at Beijing's Tiananmen Square, a thousand students began a hunger strike. This was timed to take place simultaneously with the planned visit of Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in order to reach the widest international audience with their demands. The hunger strikers were surrounded by thousands of supporters in the square. Protesters' demands were largely over democratic rights, including freedom of speech and the press, improved treatment of intellectual workers and an end to the rampant corruption of the ruling bureaucracy.

The welcoming ceremony for Gorbachev was planned for May 15 at the Great Hall of the People, only hundreds of feet from where the protests has been taking place. The anger and determination of the protesters put the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy in a crisis. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary Zhao Ziyang appealed to protesters on state-run national television to call off the protests to ensure a successful summit meeting.

The day of Gorbachev's arrival, half a million demonstrators marched in the square in defiance of Chinese authorities' appeals, forcing a change in the route of the Gorbachev motorcade. The number of hunger strikers grew to 3,000. Workers joined in the demonstration with chants such as "The citizens have joined in! Long live the students!" A young worker told the press, "They are saying what's in our hearts."

The crowds in the square swelled to more than a million people on the second and third days of the summit. Chinese premier Li Peng denounced students' demands and threatened a crackdown. "I don't care if you want to listen or not. Beijing is paralyzed, coming to anarchy, out of control. The entire nation is affected. Students should leave the square without preconditions."

In a clear rift among CCP leaders, Zhao Ziyang offered to resign his post as general secretary and pleaded for the protests to end, saying in a televised speech: "We were too late in coming. I'm sorry. Your criticism of us is justified. I'm not

asking for your forgiveness. I'm just saying your bodies have become very weak. Your hunger strike is already in its seventh day. Things can't go on like this."

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50 years ago: Khrushchev, Nasser mark beginning of Aswan dam

On May 12, 1964, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and Egypt's military ruler Gamel Abdel Nasser marked the completion of the first phase of the construction of the Aswan High dam on the Nile. At the ceremony, the two leaders detonated a dynamite charge that diverted the river into a new channel.

The dam, begun in January 1960, was expected to generate 2.1 million megawatts of electricity when completed in 1969 and end the annual cycle of floods and drought on the Nile by creating a massive lake upstream. Through irrigation, the project would create a million or more acres of new farmland along the narrow strip of land along the Nile upon which Egypt relied for most of its food.

The Soviet Union financed and provided technical support for the \$1.3 billion project. Thousands of Soviet workers aided in the construction, and 3,000, along with their families, were present at the ceremonies.

The Aswan project was the high point of Soviet wheeling and dealing with the bourgeois nationalist regimes of the Middle East, in which these representatives of the impotent and reactionary bourgeoisie were glorified by the Stalinists and even presented to Arab and Soviet workers as socialists. The Stalinist bureaucracy hoped it would help stabilize the Nasser regime, which balanced between imperialism and the working class. In the course of his 17-day visit to Egypt, Khrushchev presented Nasser and Field Marshal Abdul Hakim Amer with the Order of Lenin, pronouncing them "heroes of the Soviet Union."

Alongside Khrushchev and Nasser were President Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria, President Abdullah Sallah of Yemen, and President Salam Aref of Iraq. The Baathist regime that Aref represented had in recent months killed, tortured, and arrested thousands of members of the Iraqi Communist Party.

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75 years ago: Harlan County miners sold out by UMWA

On May 12, 1939, the US government announced that the dispute between Appalachian coal miners and their employers was over—or at least for those at 2,400 of the affected 3,000 mines—much to the relief of the Roosevelt administration, which was faced with the threat of a coal famine if miners stayed out much longer.

Under pressure from striking workers and the White House to reach an agreement, the coal mine owners of the Appalachian region agreed to resume production at once under a new contract with the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), recognizing it as the exclusive bargaining agent for all employees.

About 60,000 miners in Harlan County, Kentucky, and some other fields in Kentucky and West Virginia, were not covered by the deal, after an informal consortium of mine operators known as the “Southern Bloc” refused to go along with it. John L. Lewis, the president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), of which his own union, the UMWA, was then the largest affiliate, was pitted in a jurisdictional brawl with the Progressive Miners of America, and was anxious to come to terms even if it meant leaving a large section of the workforce without union recognition.

On May 15 in Harlan County, days after the signing of the agreement, National Guard troops blocked 3,000 striking coal miners who were en route to picket lines at mines where owners had refused to sign. Troops were placed on the border of Kentucky to prevent miners from other states from supporting their fellow workers.

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100 years ago: Thousands attend memorial for socialist Daniel De Leon

On May 17, 1914, thousands of workers attended a memorial service in New York for Daniel De Leon, an early pioneer of socialism in the American workers’ movement. De Leon had died May 11.

While the meeting was underway, a huge crowd gathered, lining up on the street for several blocks. Many socialist and trade union organizations participated in the meeting, representing broad sections of the city’s working class. After the meeting, as many as 7,000 joined in a funeral march.

De Leon had been born in 1852 on the island of Curaçao, off

the coast of Venezuela, into a middle-class family. Educated in Europe, he was fluent in German, Spanish, Dutch, Latin, French, English and ancient Greek, and was able to read Portuguese, Italian and modern Greek.

Having migrated to the United States, De Leon became the editor of a Spanish-language newspaper that called for the liberation of Cuba from Spanish colonial rule in 1872. Over the following years, he worked as a schoolteacher and an attorney, before entering academia.

De Leon turned toward the socialist movement in the midst of social upheavals in 1886, supporting the New York mayoral campaign of Henry George, a radical opponent of social inequality associated with the trade union movement. De Leon made a study of the fundamentals of Marxism and joined the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), rapidly becoming a leading member and the editor of its newspaper.

He was active in the American labor movement, both as a leader of the SLP and as prominent member of the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance, a workers’ organization that merged with the revolutionary-syndicalist International Workers of the World.

De Leon took a clear stand against the reformist conceptions that dominated much of the early American socialist movement, but he did so from a sectarian perspective. The SLP, under De Leon’s leadership, tended towards the conception that the working class would simply turn to a revolutionary perspective at the decisive hour, and undertook few practical interventions into the developing struggles of the working class. This outlook reflected both the immaturity of the American socialist movement and the difficulties produced by the right-wing, anti-socialist orientation of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and other trade union organizations.

Nevertheless, De Leon played a significant role in acquainting the American working class with the traditions of the European socialist movement, including by translating a number of works by Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Lassalle and others into English. In subsequent years, prominent figures in the revolutionary movement, including James P. Cannon, longtime American Trotskyist leader, paid tribute to De Leon’s work.

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